

PLUCK AND LUCK

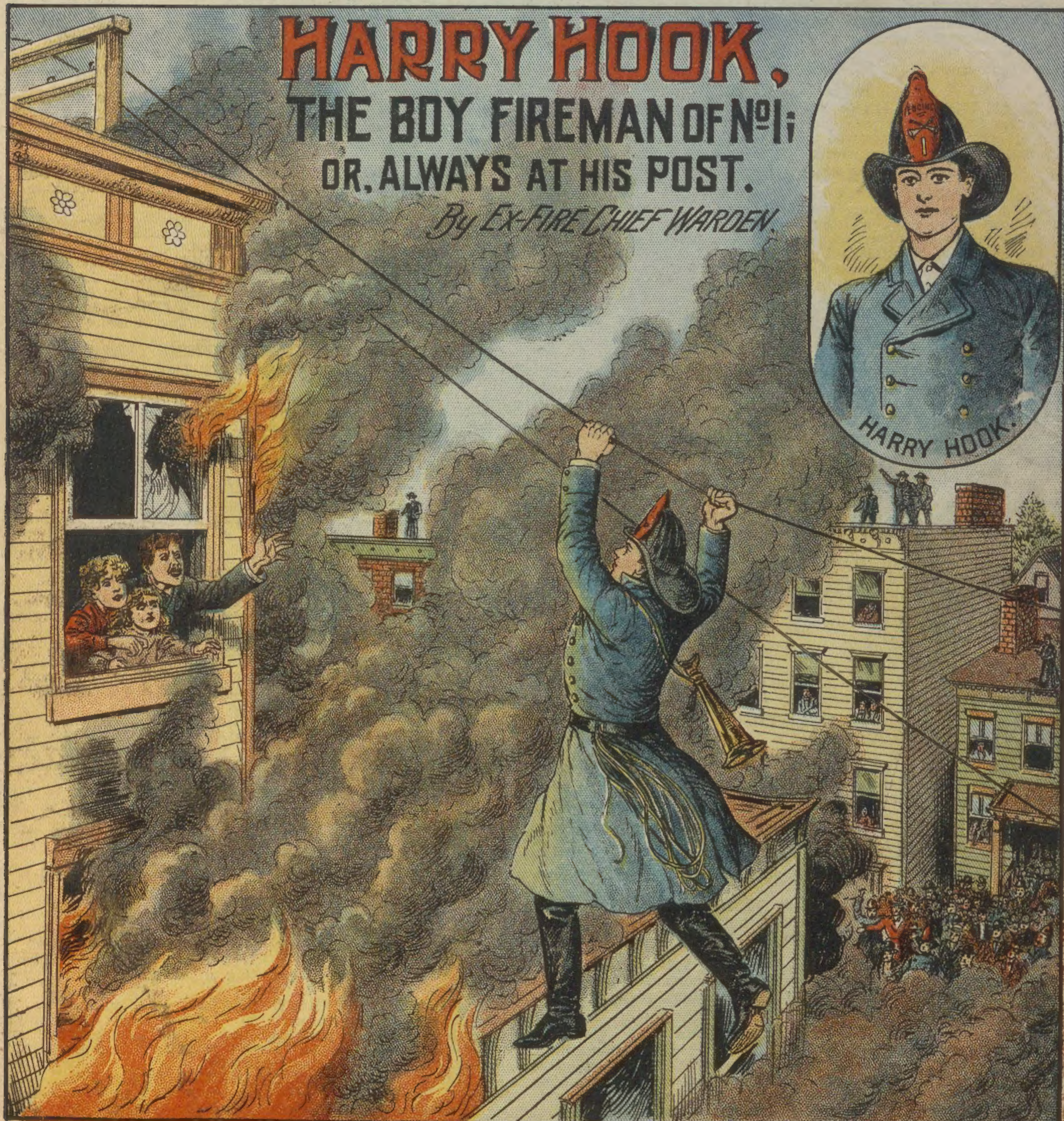
COMPLETE
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No. 252.

NEW YORK, APRIL 1, 1903.

Price 5 Cents.



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NEW YORK, APRIL 1, 1903.

Price 5 Cents.

Harry Hook, the Boy Fireman of No. 1

OR,

ALWAYS AT HIS POST.

By Ex-Fire Chief Warden.

CHAPTER I.

THE BOY FIREMAN.

Our story will open in a certain small city in the heart of the oil regions in Pennsylvania. For want of a better name let us call it Oilville.

Anthracite coal as well as oil was one of the staple products of the country about Oilville. What with the coal mines and the oil wells it was quite a prosperous place.

But Oilville was not without its natural beauties of location and scenery, and though the bulk of its inhabitants were miners and oil dippers, there were many fine residences in the town, and many intellectual and wealthy people lived there.

Not one of the readers of the story can be ignorant of the fact that a miner's life is one of danger and hardship.

But scarcely less so is that of the oil worker, for at best oil is an explosive substance, to handle which one must exercise great care and have experience.

Scarcely a week passes without the publication of some dreadful report from the mines or the oil fields of a cave-in or an explosion by which hundreds of lives are lost.

Oilville could furnish its list of casualties, and experience had long since taught the people the need of precaution.

Fire was the most dreaded danger.

At any moment it was likely to strike some oil tank and the whole place go up in flames.

With this knowledge Oilville had organized and supported a number of fire companies. In all the breadth of the land the fire boys of Oilville were noted for their valor and skill in fighting the flames.

Of the several companies the acknowledged crack was No. 1.

This company was made up of public men whose experience vied with their courage. Their fire engines were of the finest, and their records as fire fighters was most irreproachable.

But their chief, strangely enough, was not as might have been expected a grizzled old veteran, but instead a young and slender, but athletic youth.

Harry Hook, the boy chief of No. 1, was at once the most popular and deserving young man in Oilville. At least this was the sentiment of the people.

His father before him had been a famous fireman, and from boyhood Harry had known little else but the atmosphere of the engine house. Small wonder was it then that he should follow in the footsteps of his father.

Harry was possessed of a handsome, open face, great candor and pluck, and in face of the greatest danger was never known to flinch. In spite of his youth he was recognized at once as the one most eminently qualified in every way to fill the position of chief of No. 1.

Calvin Prentiss, the owner of the oil wells, and the millionaire of the town, was ready to swear by Harry Hook, the boy fireman.

"I tell you, friends," he would say, emphatically, "he was born to fight fire. It is in him, and his equal can't be found anywhere."

Few disputed this assertion of Mr. Prentiss, but naturally one so prominent and popular as Harry Hook was not without enemies.

One of the bitterest of these was Jim Bisbee, a former member of No. 1.

He was a bad character in every way, having served a term in the penitentiary. His real history was not known for some time after his advent into Oilville. When he could no longer conceal his black record, he perpetrated a villainous game which proved him a desperado and caused his discharge from the company.

This was the robbery of a needy farmer on the outskirts of the town. The result was that the poor victim was placed in very straightened circumstances, and but for the sympathetic aid of the townspeople his helpless family would have starved.

The police in vain tried to run the wretch down.

Bisbee bade them defiance. There were plenty of inaccessible spots in the hills about where the villain could hide. It was known that he had confederates, and every bit of burglary or crime with which Oilville was afflicted was charged at once to Bisbee and his gang.

Indeed, the villain had gone so far as to make threats of incendiarism against the town, for his hatred against it and its people was of the bitterest sort.

A message had been received by the mayor, signed with the brute's initials, in which he conveyed the warning that he would sit on Black Cap some night, a craggy mountain overlooking the town, and, like Nero of old, watch the city burn.

A state of terrorism had for a time prevailed among the majority of the people. Many feared the villain would execute his threats but others declared that he was not serious, and only enjoyed working upon the fears of the people.

In vain parties were dispatched into the hills to capture Bisbee.

He eluded the shrewdest detectives, and laughed pursuit to scorn. Black Cap mountain was known to be full of caverns and dens in which safe hiding could be had.

Harry Hook had incurred the villain's hatred in a peculiar manner, and while he was a member of fire company No. 1.

One night an alarm was sounded, and instantly Harry was out of bed and away to the scene of danger.

A tenement house was in flames. Harry was not chief then, but he took it upon himself to enter the house in search of people overcome by the dense smoke.

As chance had it he burst into a room which was half filled with smoke, and through the window of which from a ladder another fireman had entered.

Upon the floor lay the form of a man who had evidently been overcome by smoke.

Harry saw the fireman who had come in at the window bend over him, and, as he supposed, to raise him and carry him to a point of safety.

But the next moment he saw how he was deceived, and witnessed a dastardly act. The fellow coolly and deliberately proceeded to go through the victim's pockets.

Speechless with indignation and surprise, Harry could not act for a moment. Then suddenly the robber lifted his face, and the boy fireman recognized him.

It was Jim Bisbee.

The villain seemed taken aback at the sight of Harry Hook. With an oath he sprang to his feet.

"Thunder and blazes!" he gasped. "I'm caught."

"Yes," said Harry, coolly. "You intended to rob that helpless man, Jim Bisbee."

"Well, what if I did?" snarled the villain. "You've no right to come spying around in this fashion."

"You are a coward and a villain, just what I thought you were."

"I s'pose you'll go and give me away now, and I'll lose my place in the company."

"I ought to do that," said Harry, sternly. "It would only be just punishment for you."

Then Harry picked up the form of the insensible man in his strong, young arms and carried him to the window, from whence he was taken down the ladder to a point of safety.

Harry did not betray Bisbee, but the villain remained his enemy just the same.

In fact, after Bisbee had become a fugitive of the law, he made oath that when opportunity came he would have the life of the brave boy chief of No. 1.

This threat did not disturb intrepid Harry Hook, however. It did worry his anxious and loving mother very much.

Harry was much devoted to his mother and worked hard to afford her a comfortable and pleasant home.

The Hooks were well respected in Oilville, though they were very poor.

But Calvin Prentiss, the rich mill owner, had known Mrs. Hook when she was a favored society belle, and in speaking of Harry's future would say:

"Never you mind, that boy will make his mark. I tell you, blood will tell whether it is in a man or a horse, and that boy has got lots of it."

One evening Harry was on his way home from a fire. He was tired and smoke begrimed and hungry. Suddenly, as he reached a dark street corner, two slender, shadowy forms flitted past him.

Into the light of a street lamp just ahead they rushed, and then Harry saw that one was a ragged youth, of possibly fourteen years, and the other a girl, not more than one year younger.

To the young fireman they looked familiar, and then he remembered that he had taken them out of a burning tenement not a month previous.

They were apparently street waifs, and misery and poverty was their lot. Harry had felt a thrill of pity for them, but his sympathy was now doubly aroused as he saw their increased wretched appearance.

"Poor creatures!" he reflected. "Very likely they have no parents, no money nor friends. I wonder if I cannot help them a bit."

The young fireman had started forward with this impulse when suddenly a man sprang out of the gloom and clutched the girl savagely by the shoulder.

"Curse you!" he cried. "You are the little hussy who cheated me in buying a newspaper last night. I asked you for an evening paper, and you gave me a morning copy. I want my penny back or I'll shake the life out of you."

The girl screamed and tried to break away from the harsh grip upon her. But her captor held her firmly.

"I did not sell you a paper," she said, in a terrified voice. "I never saw you before."

"Don't you lie to me, you little wretch," thundered the man. "You shall give me back my money or I will hand you over to the police."

Harry was too astonished at the mendacity and meanness of the man to act for a moment.

But the brother, for such the ragged lad was, dashed at the rude assailant like a panther, crying furiously:

"Don't you dare hurt my sister. Let go of her. Don't be afraid, Leda, he shan't hurt you."

"Get away, you brat," yelled the girl's captor, as he aimed a blow at the lad. "There, served you right, cuss you."

The huge fist struck the lad in the temple and laid him senseless on the sidewalk. It was a brutal blow, and it brought a scream of agony from the ragged girl's lips.

It was more than Harry could bear. In an instant he sprang forward.

"Coward, to strike such a blow!" he cried. "Unhand that little girl, or it will be the worse for you."

The man turned a white and angry face toward Harry. In the light the young fireman recognized its hard, sinister lines.

"Alden Raymond!" he gasped. "I did not think this of you!"

Alden Raymond was one of the richest men in Oilville. He was a partner with Calvin Prentiss, and the opposite to him in all respects.

Prentiss was magnanimous and noble, while Raymond was miserly and groveling, striving after a cent, and heartily disliked for his meanness by everybody.

He glared at Harry sullenly.

"It is young Hook," he gritted. "Well, what do you want?"

"I've told you!" cried Harry, forcibly. "You must release your hold on that girl, and apologize for the dastardly blow you have given that slender lad, an act not becoming a man in your standing."

"What!" cried Raymond, furiously. "who are you that you dare to face me in this manner? Pauper! Outcast!"

"Hold on!" cried Harry, strongly. "Don't you dare to address me in such a way, sir! Just at present you are a brute, and I shall deal with you as such! I am Harry Hook, the boy fireman, and you are Alden Raymond, a rich man, but if you were Cræsus himself that would not deter me from doing my duty in defending this weak and helpless little girl."

CHAPTER II.

THE TWO STREET WAIFS.

Raymond was the personification of fury, but these strong utterances of Harry Hook caused him to shrink back. He knew that he was in the wrong, but was disposed to bluff it out.

"Go on about your business, boy," he said, angrily. "I'll settle with this little hussy. She deliberately cheated me out of my money for a paper that was a day old."

"For shame!" cried Harry, with burning cheeks. "That is only a penny, sir, and what is that to a man of your wealth?"

"That is none of your business," fumed Raymond. "I propose to learn these beggars better than to impose upon honest people. Go your way."

The girl was cringing and wincing with pain beneath the savage clutch which Raymond had upon her shoulder. Harry saw that she was likely to faint, and the cruelty of the act made his blood boil.

In a moment off came his coat.

"Unhand that girl!" he thundered, "or by heavens, I'll lay my hands on you, Alden Raymond."

The latter, furious at being thus addressed, did release his grip, only to make a savage blow at Harry.

"You stripling!" he hissed. "I'll teach you a lesson now!" But Harry Hook was a wonderfully well developed youth. His muscles were hard and trained, and though slight in build, he was supple and hardy.

He easily parried the lunge made at him by Raymond. He did not wish to strike the magnate, but by an adroit movement locked elbows with him and pitched him into the gutter.

Then, just as Raymond was about to spring up, Harry seized him by the shoulders and held him down.

"Let me up!" fumed the villain, savagely. "I'll be the death of you."

"No, you won't, you mean cur!" cried Harry, forcibly. "I've got the upper hand, and I'm able to hold it."

"Curse you!"

"Spare your epithets!"

Raymond strove in vain to rise, but Harry held him in a grip of iron.

Seeing that he was worsted, the villain changed his tactics.

"Come, Hook," he said, in a softer voice. "It's all right. I let my temper run away with me. Let me up!"

"On one condition."

"What?"

"That you will go on about your business and never harm these poor children again."

"Well, I agree. Let me up."

Harry relaxed his hold, and Raymond sprang to his feet. He started away in the gloom, but at a street corner he paused, and gritted between clenched teeth:

"Curse you, Harry Hook! I have it in for you now, and you shall suffer for this interference in my plans of revenge. You little know my purpose in persecuting those ragged beggars. But my time will come."

Meanwhile, Harry had turned, and was face to face with the girl whom he had defended.

Standing before him with eager, bright face, and eyes filled with tears of gratitude, Harry was almost startled by the wonderful beauty of the girl.

The lad whom she called her brother had recovered from his swoon and was upon his feet. Both pressed forward.

"Oh, sir, you are so kind to help us!" cried the girl, full-somely. "We cannot thank you enough, sir."

"Cracky! but that there covy did give me an awful clip!" exclaimed the boy. "My head sings yet."

"Do you know him?" asked Harry, brusquely. "Did you ever see him before?"

"Yes, indeed," replied the girl, readily. "He turned us out of a room in Mother Burns' shanty one time, and would have had us sent to the reformatory but for Mother Burns, who hid us until after the officers were gone. Poor Mother Burns! She was our best friend, but she is dead now."

"Ah!" exclaimed Harry, with intense interest. "What is your name?"

"Leda Lane!" replied the girl, promptly, "and this is my brother, Jack."

The boy fireman was at once interested.

"You must tell me all about it," he said, encouragingly. "Who were your parents, and where are they now?"

The boy seemed about to speak, but checked himself and looked at his sister. The girl's face was white and drawn, as she replied:

"My mother is dead."

"And your father——"

It was a direct question. At first Leda seemed about to evade it, and then she burst forth:

"I will tell you the truth, though you do shun us for it. My father is in prison."

Harry took a step forward, and said with sympathy in his voice:

"Poor child, I shall not shrink from you for that confession. You are not responsible for that."

Sobs were bursting from Leda's bosom, and she hung her head as if in shame. Harry's whole sympathetic nature was aroused.

"Tell me what he was put in prison for."

"Oh, he was not guilty. I know he was not, for mother told me so. My father was once a rich man. Oh, we were little children then, but I can still remember the grand home we had. But one day father was arrested and tried for forgery. He had to go to prison, but I shall never believe him guilty."

Leda wept a little.

"Poor mother worked hard for us," she sobbed, "but a year ago she died. She left us with Mother Burns, an old lady eighty years old. But two months ago she died, too, and since then Jack and I have lived in a garret in Donaldson's court. We have lived on crusts of bread, and sold papers to get money. I don't know how much longer we can stand it."

"Just wait until I grow up," said Jack, stoutly. "I'm going to make lots of money and get father out of jail."

"And where do you expect to stay to-night?" asked Harry, softly.

"Oh, we shall have to go back to the garret," said Leda, with a shrug of her shoulders.

"No!" cried the impulsive young fireman. "You shall do nothing of the kind. Jack, how would you like a job of work?"

The boy's eyes danced.

"Oh, ever so much," he cried. "So I can make some money?"

"Yes, perhaps not very much at first, for you are young. Leda and Jack, I will be your friend. Come with me!"

The two waifs put their hands in Harry's and followed

him trustingly. Straight to his own humble home Harry led the way.

Mrs. Hook, a kindly faced woman, met them at the door. She stared in surprise and exclaimed:

"For mercy sakes, Harry, who have you here?"

"This is Leda and Jack Lane," replied Harry; "they are friendless and hungry. Can't we do something for them, mother?"

"I would not be doing my duty as a true Christian to refuse," said the whole souled woman. "Bring them right in, Harry."

Into the house Leda and Jack went. Here they were given hearty food by Mrs. Hook. Then Leda told more explicitly the story of her life.

Mrs. Hook listened with tears in her eyes and exclaimed:

"This is the work of Providence. My dear children, I knew your parents well. Your father, James Lane, was a wealthy and noble, and upright man, and there are few to-day who believe him guilty of the charge brought against him. It was the evidence furnished by the very man who so rudely assaulted you to-night, Alden Raymond, which sent him to prison."

A great light burst upon Harry.

"Mercy on us, mother! If that is the case, there is no doubt but that Mr. Lane was falsely convicted. Oh, if it were only possible to prove that."

"It has not been thus far," declared Mrs. Hook, with much emotion, "but I would not be true to Christian duty and old ties of friendship, if I did not make a home for James Lane's children. Leda and Jack, you are welcome here."

Leda rushed into Mrs. Hook's arms, sobbing with joy. Jack drew himself up proudly, saying:

"I am going to work, and make lots of money to get my father out of prison."

As for Harry Hook, his bosom was quite filled with sympathetic emotions and resolutions.

He had become deeply interested in this case of injury and deepest wrong. And he saw, as he believed clearly, the scheming, villainous hand of Alden Raymond through it all.

"I will beat the villain," he muttered. "He shall pay for this rascality well. If there is any power on earth to do it, I will prove Jim Lane's innocence."

"It will be all right, Harry," said Mrs. Hook, later, aside. "I am glad that fate has brought these children to us. Leda shall be a companion for me while you are absent, and Jack will be at work. It will be little incumbrance for us."

"That pleases me well, mother," said Harry, with glistening eyes, "but truly that Alden Raymond is a villain."

"I believe it."

"I can understand now why he seeks to crush these children. He would take their lives if he could out of hatred for James Lane."

"Yes."

"Well, we will need to look out for them sharply. Oh, if Fate would only enable me to turn the tables on the villain, and place the guilt where it belongs."

"It would be great joy," declared Mrs. Hook. "One thing is sure. James Lane, languishing to-day in prison, is an innocent man, and I cannot believe that God will allow his traducers to go unpunished."

Mrs. Hook set on the evening meal, and all partook of it. The little waifs were ravenously hungry, and ate heartily.

But Leda's heart seemed full to overflowing. When the meal was over she rushed into Mrs. Hook's arms, crying:

"Oh, you are so kind to me, and are so like my own mother."

"Bless you, my child," said the tender hearted woman. "I will fill your mother's place as well as I am able. Believe me."

It was a happy evening, and not for many days had Harry Hook been in a happy frame of mind. But suddenly, just as the clock struck ten, there burst forth upon the air a thrilling sound.

Clang, clang, clang!

"Fire!" cried Harry, leaping to his feet. "My helmet and my boots! I must be away to the fire!"

In a twinkling the young chief of No. 1 had left the house. As he rushed down the steps he saw the western sky all ablaze.

And to his hearing came again the thrilling alarm:

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Duty called, and Harry Hook, the boy chief, had thoughts for nothing else at that moment.

CHAPTER III.

A BRAVE RESCUE.

Harry Hook at once saw from the size of the blaze in the sky that the fire was one of much importance.

He instantly thought of the oil tanks, but a moment's reflection convinced him that it was not these.

He rushed with all haste down the darkened street to the engine house.

When he arrived there it was to find the doors opened and three of the company already there.

Very quickly the others arrived. Horses to draw the engines were unknown in those days. All the men lay hold on the rope, and out into the street the engine was pulled.

It was a mad race to the scene of the fire.

Every nerve was strained. There were strong men and fleet runners in No. 1. There was no use for weak lungs or puny limbs. All must be men of good wind and muscle to "run with the machine."

No. 1 company was the first at the fire by fully two minutes. Instant action was made.

The building on fire was a large warehouse, in which were stored articles of a very inflammable nature, such as wool and hay in bundles. Quickly Harry had a long line of hose out, and men at the pumps.

A powerful stream of water was quickly on the flames. Other companies were now on hand, and a battle to subdue the flames was begun.

But they had gained tremendous headway, and it seemed for a time as if they could not be checked.

Usually Harry Hook's first thought was of human life, but it had not seemed to him possible that human beings were in the warehouse.

But suddenly a hoarse roar went up from the mob of spectators.

"My God! There are three persons in the tower! Save them!"

It required but a glance from Harry to realize the appalling fact.

In a window of the high tower of the warehouse there were three persons, a man, a woman, and a little girl.

The flames seemed likely to reach them at any moment. They were in the most abject terror. It was a thrilling sight.

At this moment through the crowd dashed a carriage. Out of it leaped a man, well dressed, and of patrician appearance.

He was the owner of the warehouse, just arrived, and as he saw the man, woman and child in the tower, he cried:

"For God's sake, save them! It is the watchman, Jenkins, and his wife and little girl. Did nobody else know they lived in the tower?"

"Yes!" cried a voice in the crowd. "But it was supposed that they had come out long ago."

"Save them!" screamed the excited owner of the warehouse. "Don't let them burn to death."

"Impossible!" cried the marshal. "I cannot risk the life of any man in that attempt. In three minutes the flames will sweep that tower."

"Then I call for volunteers!" cried the owner of the warehouse. "Are there not men here brave enough to attempt that act of mercy?"

Silence fell upon the vast crowd. Not a man seemed courageous enough to reply.

Harry Hook had stood like one in a spell, but an inspiration brought him out of the lethargy now upon him.

With great coolness of purpose, and quickness of eye, he took in the situation and measured the chances of success.

Human life was in danger. All the daring of his nature was aroused. With a sharp cry he sprang forward.

"Pull out the long ladders!" he cried. "I will volunteer to go!"

"You?" gasped the sturdy fire marshal, with blanched cheek and reproving gesture.

"Yes."

"You are mad, Harry Hook. It is certain death. You had better not!"

"Enough!" cried Harry. "Up with the ladders! This is no time for hesitation."

The spell was broken. A tremendous cheer went up from the crowd. Ready hands seized the ladders, and they were quickly raised.

But, while they reached to the upper story of the warehouse, they would not anywhere near reach the window in the tower.

For a moment the effort at rescue seemed futile. A groan burst from the crowd. The fate of the imprisoned people seemed sealed.

There was, of course, the alternative of passing through the window into the main body of the warehouse and thence up to the tower. There was a shout by the besieged ones to come down by this avenue.

But this was impossible, as flames were seen bursting from many windows of the tower. The descent had long been cut off.

But Harry Hook was not to be baffled. He mounted the ladder and went up with the agility of a monkey.

At his waist he carried a long coil of rope. This was of fireproof material, manufactured as well as invented by himself.

Up, up he went. Great waves of smoke surged out, and at times he was hid from sight.

Breathless and wild with excitement, the crowd watched him. He was seen to reach the upper rounds of the ladder. What would be his next move?

To the surprise of all, he entered the warehouse by the window.

"Mad youth!" cried the fire marshal. "He cannot reach the tower that way. He is cut off by the fire."

But a great shout went up from the crowd now. A scuttle or trap in the roof was seen to swing open and up through it came the lithe form of Harry Hook.

How the crowd cheered! One moment the boy fireman stood there in the glare of the light from the fire.

Then he measured the distance to the tower window with his eye. It was fully twenty feet. How was he to reach it, or provide a way for the imprisoned ones to descend?

It was for several moments a serious question. But again Harry's native wit and foresight came to his relief.

Across the room ran several heavy wires. One or two of these branched away to the top of the tower.

Harry felt one of these wires and tested the strength of it on the tower. It easily supported him.

It would have seemed a mad feat to have attempted the passage of that wire through the air to the upper part of the tower. But it was the only chance to reach the imprisoned ones, and Harry Hook was determined not to fail.

To the agony and horror of the crowd he was seen to essay the feat. Hand over hand, he went up the slanting wire. It cut cruelly into his hands, and gave him pain, but he kept on.

Swinging in mid air, he was certainly above a vortex of death. The least slip, or the giving way of the wire would have precipitated him to death.

But the boy fireman never faltered. Up the wire he still made his slow progress. Higher and higher. Would he reach his goal? This was the agonizing query in everybody's mouth.

It was a thrilling scene.

Swinging in mid air, over the blazing roof of the warehouse, Harry Hook seemed going to his death. The chances were, seemingly, a thousand to one against him.

Yet he kept on steadily, boldly, pluckily. Now he was within a few feet of the summit of the tower. A deep breath was drawn by every one as he was seen to go over the parapet.

He had accomplished the journey in safety. He had already made the passage to the top of the tower.

But this was not all. The peril seemed greater now by a thousand fold. To be sure, he was on the top of the tower, but how was he ever to get down?

Harry paused one instant on the parapet. Then he descended by winding stairs to the floor upon which were the Jenkins family. The tower room was filled with smoke, and flames were beginning to dance through the cracks in the floor.

Mute with horror, the imprisoned victims made no speech as Harry appeared. The young fireman rushed to the window. Over the sill he passed one end of the fireproof rope and secured it.

A quick noose was made in the other end. This he threw over the man's shoulders.

"Get over the window sill!" he cried, sharply. "I shall lower you to the scuttle in the roof below. If you are a man you will go no further. Stay there and take your wife and child as they are lowered."

"All right, boss," said Jenkins, huskily.

Over the sill the watchman went. He reached the scuttle in the roof in safety. The plan of the boy fireman was seen and received with cheers by the crowd below.

The next moment Harry had Mrs. Jenkins and her child clasped in her arms also being lowered to the scuttle in the roof.

Jenkins received them, and they went down to the window at which there was a ladder. Two firemen were on the ladder, and they took the child and woman down in safety to the ground.

Jenkins followed quickly. The rescue had been safely made. The crowd was frantic with excitement. But where was Harry Hook?

He had disappeared from view, and the tower window where he had been was one vivid sheet of flame.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FIREMAN'S FETE.

Words cannot fully express the horror of the crowd at the awful reflection that Harry Hook, after performing so brave a

rescue, had succumbed to the flames in the tower of the burning warehouse.

Certainly he was not at the window, which was now one sheet of flame.

What other hypothesis could there be than that he had fallen a victim of the flames?

It looked like a noble sacrifice of life, but Fate had not willed that Harry Hook's brave career should be cut short in so summary a fashion.

Even as Harry was engaged in lowering Mrs. Jenkins to the roof, flames came up through the tower sheathing and nearly drove him from the window.

He realized at once that if he made his escape it must be by a rear exit. He was even forced to abandon his fireproof rope.

Not an instant was to be lost. He was nearly suffocated before reaching the stairs leading into the upper tower.

But he overcame the feeling, and nearly exhausted, crawled up the stairs to the parapet. Here the air revived him, but what a thrilling position was his!

He was far above a seething hell of flames. Fortunately, at that moment a stream of water came up and cooled the wire, which had been too hot for him to descend by.

It was Harry's only chance. He at once swung out on the wire and began to descend.

With blistered hands he reached the roof. But the scuttle was now filled with flames. A great cry of horror now went up from the crowd.

Every avenue of escape seemed cut off. But the young fireman was resolved to fight for his life to the last.

He crept along the edge of the ridge pole to its farthest end. Here he was for a moment safe from the flames.

Then he saw his comrades below raising a ladder.

Up it came and rested against the end of the building. But it was fully fifteen feet too short.

There seemed no possible way for Harry to reach the ladder. The crowd groaned with horror, and the lad gave an apprehensive glance over his shoulder.

The flames were nearing him every moment. The shingles beneath him were already beginning to curl with the heat.

What was to be done?

It was an awful problem. In that moment Harry Hook seemed to live a century. Only the coolest nerves could have stood the peril as philosophically as he did at that moment.

"God help me!" he moaned. "I must risk a leap for that ladder! It is my only hope."

Indeed, this seemed true enough. If he could strike the ladder safely he would be saved. If not, an awful death would be his.

Yet it was death to remain on the roof.

Only a moment did Harry hesitate now. It was a desperate chance, but he took it.

He swung himself over the edge of the roof. Every person in the agonized crowd below understood his purpose. Not a word was spoken.

One moment Harry swung in mid air over the edge of the roof. Then his thrilled gaze beheld an orifice in the clapboards or sheathing just at his waist.

It was the drowning man's straw, and Harry, hanging by one hand, thrust his other into the orifice and allowed himself to slide down to the length of his arms again.

This brought his knees to a level with the top rung of the ladder.

In a moment he wound his knees about this, swung down, and embraced the ladder with arms and knees. In this manner he went sliding down to the ground with the rapidity of the wind.

He alighted upon the ground safe and unharmed, and was instantly the hero of the hour.

He was surrounded by scores of eager and excited friends, who showered expressions of admiration and praise upon him. Harry, however, modestly extricated himself from the crowd and joined his brother firemen.

Only the frame of the building was left standing when at length the flames were subdued.

Until the last Harry Hook remained at his post.

Then, somewhat wearied, but with a happy heart for having done his duty, he wended his way homeward.

Three days after this advent the first of a series of thrilling incidents which were to wield a powerful influence over Harry Hook's life occurred.

A grand fete day for the firemen of the county was at hand, and the affair was to be held in Oilville.

Fire companies from the different towns were to be present, and were to compete in matches of skill for valuable prizes and honors.

Two crack companies from the adjoining towns of Maynard and Weldon were to be on hand, and had boastfully announced their intention of carrying off the honors of the day.

This spirit of friendly rivalry was very strong, and Harry Hook, the boy chief, smiled in a very significant manner, and mentally resolved that if the prizes were to be captured by outsiders, it would be at the cost of a hard struggle.

The Hook household was very happy these days.

Mrs. Hook found pleasant companionship in Leda Lane, the waif, who already seemed to her like her own daughter. Arrangements had been made for little Jack Lane to go to school, and the future looked bright and happy, indeed, for the two waifs.

Mrs. Hook's kindly soul was stirred with a deep liking for Leda.

"Ah, child," she said, with a sigh, "I knew your dear mother well. She was an angel upon earth. And your father—ah! I can never believe he was guilty of the charge brought against him."

Leda, in the privacy of her chamber wept many hours in secret over this sad page in her young life. Ah, how she prayed for her father, and that he might some day get his rights.

Harry had taken more than an ordinary interest in Leda. There was an instinctive sense of liking which was mutual, and Harry always felt pleasure in her company, never dreaming that this was some day to ripen into love and passion.

The day of the fete came. At an early hour Harry was at the engine house of No. 1, and the fire engine shone like burnished gold as it went forth that day.

Great crowds of people had gathered in the park to see the contest.

All the fire companies arrived in due course of time.

A fine display they made in their red shirts and helmets. But everybody noted No. 1 and its boy chief as the greatest of all.

"That's all right," growled the chief of one of the Maynard companies, a rough, uncouth fellow. "Tain't dress that ye want for firemen. It's ther muscle and ther git thar! I reckon them chaps don't stand within a row of candles of a prize."

After the band had played, speeches had been made and the noon meal indulged in, there came the announcement of the trials of competitive skill.

Every one rushed to the open ground for nobody wished to miss the sight.

The first feat was essayed by one of the Weldon companies. The fire boys came into line with a stirring cheer.

The word was given, and away they went across the field a certain distance.

Then halting with what seemed like amazing rapidity, the

line of hose was run out two hundred feet and connected with a lake of water, and then by lusty work at the pumps the company from Weldon had water upon the building in the remarkably quick time of two minutes and four seconds.

The crowd cheered itself hoarse as this company came marching back.

There were many bets that the feat would not be equaled.

But Harry Hook smiled in a peculiar manner and kept his own counsel.

The young fire chief's heart never once forsook him. His philosophic reasoning was that to get beat was no disgrace if one only persevered and did their work well. One half the battle was courage.

The next company to come to the fore was Maynard No. 6. Stout laddies they were to a man, and they were cheered by a large coterie of friends.

The word was given and away went the Maynard boys. Like tigers they worked to beat the previous record.

Everybody watched them work with breathless interest.

Those who held watches suddenly began to look queer. It seemed as if it was an incredibly less time than No. 6 did the necessary work.

They reached the scene of action, laid the hosepipes, and got water to a great height when the signal came.

The judge of the affair with great excitement got up and declared the record.

It created the most intense interest. The record was one minute and fifty-four seconds. It seemed unprecedented, indeed. For a time everybody was amazed. No. 4, the Weldon company, was beaten by ten seconds.

Instantly the prize was conceded to Maynard company No. 6.

"I tell you that the Oilville company can't beat that record," cried one enthusiast. "The Maynard No. 6 is certainly the boss."

But cool and steadfast Harry Hook said nothing. He drew his men up in line, each waiting the signal to go.

Every one was bound to concede that Oilville No. 1 was a dandy appearing company. They were muscular, finely formed men, and apparently capable of great endurance as well as agility.

A great hush fell upon the crowd as No. 1 lined up.

The question upon every one's lips was: "will they beat No. 6?" Many in the crowd of gambling propensities began making bets at once.

The word came for the start. Upon the instant Harry Hook was away in advance of his men.

Like a meteor No. 1 shot down the line.

People held their breath to see the fire boys cover the distance at racehorse speed. They reached the line, stopped, and began to unlimber hose.

Like automatons they worked, and now the pumps were going. A second or two later the column of water shot up into the air and seemed to go further than any of the others.

The crowd burst into a spell of maniacal cheering.

No. 1 came back to the starting line with quick steps and flushed faces.

Even before it was announced, the result was known.

"No. 1, Oilville company," cried the record keeper, "executes the trial in one minute and forty-four seconds. This is ten second better than the previous company and twenty seconds better than the first."

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!" yelled the crowd, and at that moment Harry Hook was the happiest man on the grounds.

His company had won the prize and friends pressed about him on all sides, glad to press his hand and offer warm congratulations.

CHAPTER V.

AT THE RED BRIDGE.

It was a proud moment for Harry Hook. He had won deserved success, for he had spared no effort in training his men.

He had demonstrated quite clearly that No. 1 was the champion company, and was not this triumph worth recording?

But even in the midst of all this success and popularity, the boy fireman, like many before him, was not without his enemies.

Even as he stood, triumphant and happy, a hand holding a glass of lemonade was thrust forward.

"Here is something your mother wished me to bring you, Harry," said a voice. "She thinks it will cool your throat."

In the excitement of the moment the unusual phase of this incident did not occur to Harry.

It seemed like his mother to do this, thoughtful for his welfare. The lemonade looked tempting enough, and Harry's throat was parched, so he accepted it.

He raised the glass to his lips and would have drained it but for a singular incident.

He saw what seemed like a white sediment in the liquid.

It was floating upon the surface of the lemonade, and in the bottom of the glass it was also quite thick.

Some intuitive sense of caution caused Harry to lower the glass before he put it to his lips.

With an impulse he dashed its contents to the ground. A friend who stood in the crowd took notice of this.

He edged nearer Harry, and in a low voice asked:

"What did you throw that lemonade away for, Harry?"

The young fireman recognized the speaker as a young medical student by the name of Leslie Rogers.

"I declare I hardly know, Leslie," he said, confusedly. "I—I—yes, I do, too. It looked as if there was something in it to spoil it."

"Why that is queer!" exclaimed Leslie, with a queer flash of his eyes. "What did it look like?"

"Oh, very likely it was my imagination," replied Harry, confusedly. "I suppose I was foolish in doing so."

"By no means!" said Leslie, firmly. "Allow me to look at the glass."

Harry did not refuse.

The young medical student took the glass and studied it for a moment. He retained the glass, and said:

"Allow me to keep this for analysis?"

"Certainly," replied Harry, with astonishment. "You don't mean——"

"Wait! Do you know who gave this to you?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. Mother sent it to me."

"Do you know that for a fact?"

"Why—no!"

"I thought so."

Harry was amazed. He, however, began to guess at the meaning of it all, and clutching Leslie's arm, said in an undertone:

"What is in the glass?"

"Well," replied Leslie, slowly, "I'm not prepared to say. But I think it is a most deadly poison."

Harry Hook reeled back, a trifle overcome with horror.

"My God!" he whispered, "I have an enemy."

"There is no doubt of that."

"And he has tried to take my life."

"It looks like that. I can say that it is very fortunate for you that you did not drink the contents of that glass."

"Great heavens!" gasped Harry. "I cannot understand it. Who can it be?"

"Perhaps you will discover in time. But allow me to retain the glass. Ask your mother all about it, and then come to my office to-morrow, will you?"

Harry promised, and for the rest of the day went about in a somewhat dazed state.

That night, at home, he asked Mrs. Hook if she had sent him the glass. Mrs. Hook disclaimed all knowledge of it, and then Harry told her of the affair.

Mrs. Hook nearly fainted with horror.

"My soul, Harry!" she gasped: "You have an assassin on your track!"

"It looks like it, mother," said Harry, soberly. "But who can it be? I never harmed any one in my life."

"Oh, my son!" cried the good woman, bursting into tears. "If they take you from me, then I am undone."

Harry clasped his mother in his arms.

"Fear not, mother!" he cried, nobly. "I have God and the right on my side and I cannot fail to baffle them."

"Oh, but I shall have no more happiness. I shall worry about you all the time."

Leda had stood near and listened to all. She now came forward.

"Mrs. Hook," she said, with a pallid face, "I think that this is all on my account. I think I had better go away."

Harry Hook stood for a moment with trembling form. Then he clasped both of the girl waif's hands in his.

"Leda, you shall not go away," he cried, passionately. "Let them do their worst. They are but cowards to attempt such vile tricks. I think I can fathom it all, though. I have no doubt that the hand of Alden Raymond is in this deal. But fear not. I will stand by you to the end."

The next day Harry went away to the office of his medical friend, Leslie Rogers.

"That powder I have discovered to be composed of the most deadly poisons," declared the young student. "You are fortunate to have escaped the trap. Will you not put a detective on the case?"

"I will think it over," said Harry, soberly. "I have my suspicions, which, if verified, will render the services of a detective unnecessary."

"I hope you will succeed in locating the villain," said Leslie, warmly.

"I thank you."

Matters went on in their usual rut for a number of days. In some manner the report leaked out that an attempt had been made to poison the boy chief of No. 1.

Popular indignation ran high, and if the wretch could have been located it would have gone hard, indeed, with him.

Harry kept one eye open all the while for a hidden foe. But matters went on as serene as ever until one evening, at supper Leda came in very much excited.

The young girl had obtained work at a little shop nearby, and in coming home passed by the shadows of a small and dark alley.

In this alley two men were talking, and a word dropped by one of them caused Leda to linger a moment and listen. She was excusable, as that word was her own name.

"I heard them make an appointment," she said, in telling the story to Harry; "they agreed to meet at the Red Bridge to-night at eleven."

"Was that all you heard?" asked Harry, with great excitement and interest.

"It was," replied Leda.

"You do not know who they were?"

"I had no way of telling. From their voices, though, I should think that one of them was Alden Raymond."

"Ah, it is very strange!"

The subject dropped, but at a later hour Harry left the house. He imparted his plan to nobody.

"Red Bridge, at eleven," he muttered. "I will be there beforehand."

It was fifteen minutes before eleven when the young fireman, lurking in the shadows of the Red Bridge, which spanned a small stream fully a mile in the outskirts of the city, saw two darkly muffled men meet on the bridge.

They stood a moment in the glare of the bridge lamps. Then they repaired to the shadows of some trees near.

Harry managed to creep near enough to overhear every word of their conversation.

He was thrilled to discover that the two men were Jim Bisbee and Alden Raymond. These words fell clear and startling upon the ears of Harry Hook:

"You evidently don't see my game, Jim Bisbee," Raymond was saying. "Well, it is rather a deep one."

"And a dangerous one, I reckon," growled Bisbee.

"Perhaps so; that will depend much on how it is worked. There's one little scamp in Oilville who seems likely to give me a deal of trouble."

"Who might that be?"

"It's that cursed little fireman, Harry Hook. Do you know that he has both of Lane's children at his house caring for them. I wish they were strangled. Do you know that I have such a keen hatred for Jim Lane that I could do it to spite him."

Bisbee laughed coarsely.

"Ye ought not to kick," he said. "Lane is behind the bars."

"I admit that, and that I have the best of the situation, but I am not satisfied."

"You ain't, eh?"

"No."

"Well, what do you want of me?"

Raymond cleared his throat. Harry Hook was listening most intently.

"I might as well explain. There are private reasons why I want to break Calvin Prentiss up. I won't give those just now. But it is my keen desire to see the oil works in ashes."

Harry Hook drew a deep breath.

Bisbee made reply:

"Ah, that's the game, eh? And you want me to do it?"

"There is no better man."

"You're about right."

"Will you do it?"

"What's the recompense?"

"Five thousand dollars in greenbacks."

Harry Hook's heart beat like a trip hammer. He heard Bisbee give a low whistle and then reply:

"Is that the best you'll do?"

"Yes."

"Is that all you want done?"

"No, there is the residence——"

"And you want that burned, too?"

"Yes."

Bisbee walked up and down for a few moments, whistling softly.

"I reckon you couldn't have picked a better man for the job," he declared. "I'm in for it, and Prentiss' house and works shall lay in ashes afore a month. The matter is all settled."

Harry Hook had certainly gained most valuable information upon his eavesdropping tour.

CHAPTER VI.

FACING THE VILLAIN.

It seemed to the young fireman as if his brain must burst with the force of the terrible revelation.

A more awful and heinous plot he had never heard of, and, indeed, the human mind could hardly conceive worse.

It was certain that Alden Raymond was a literal fiend. Bisbee was, of course, bad enough, but Raymond proved himself at once an arch villain.

"Then you accept the offer?" asked Raymond, coolly.

"The terms are five thousand?"

"Yes."

"I accept it."

"All right. I shall consider the matter settled. There are one or two other things I want done, but I will see you about them later."

"All right, just as you say," rejoined Bisbee.

"For instance, those youngsters of Lane's. The girl is pretty, and I am a little bit mashed on her, but the boy——"

"I understand," said Bisbee, significantly. "I'll see you about that later."

"You are going back to Black Cap?"

"Yes."

"When shall I hear from you?"

"Within thirty-six hours."

"All right. Good-night."

The two arch schemers separated. Bisbee glided into the gloom beyond the bridge. Raymond started away toward the town.

Harry Hook emerged from his concealment and followed the latter.

The youth's mind was in a terrible state. He was wholly in a quandary to know just what to do.

It occurred to him to follow the villain to town, and there cause his arrest, and thus break up the dastardly scheme of incendiarism.

But, on the other hand, he reflected that it would be necessary for him to prove his accusations.

He had only his own testimony with which to do this. Raymond's word in court would therefore be as good as his, and the villain could not be convicted.

As yet arrest was quite plainly out of the question.

But Harry continued to follow the victim and to vainly tax his brain for some way to circumvent his terrible plans.

There seemed but one way, and this was to warn Mr. Prentiss at once, and set a trap for the incendiaries.

As Harry considered this plan it looked to him like the best, and he at once decided upon it.

But in his eagerness and excitement he had forgotten the risk, and was now so closely behind Raymond that the latter suddenly turned and saw him.

The villain's face turned purple with fear and wrath in the light of the street lamp.

He made a panther-like leap forward and grasped Harry's arm.

"Ten thousand fiends!" he hissed. "Have you heard all? What are you following me for?"

But Harry shook off his grasp.

"Take care, Mr. Alden Raymond," he said, sternly. "I will stand no insult from you—scoundrel that you are."

The villain was pale with rage.

"How dare you talk to me that way?" he hissed savagely.

"Humph!" said Harry, contemptuously. "Why should I be afraid of you?"

"Curse you for a sneak!" gritted the villain; "have you followed me to-night? Speak! I want the truth."

Calmly Harry faced the schemer.

"I will answer!" he said, fearlessly. "I have followed you to-night and——"

"You have heard all?"

"I have."

Raymond's whole form for a moment quivered like an aspen.

It seemed for a moment as if he was about to spring at Harry, but with an effort he controlled himself.

Perhaps the knowledge of the young fireman's muscular powers had something to do with his restraint.

"Curse you! I have a mind to kill you!" he gritted, madly. "What are you going to do about it?"

"I have not decided," said Harry, coolly. "It is likely, however, that the officers of the law will interview you."

But Raymond laughed scornfully.

"That won't do any good," he cried. "You can't prove anything."

The young fireman knew this, but was not inclined to admit it.

"We shall see," he said, quietly.

"Then you mean to try it?"

"I have not decided."

"It would be the worst thing you ever did. Your life would pay for it. Mark my word. It is not safe to cross my path."

"Mr. Alden Raymond," said Harry, coldly, "I have no more fear for you than I have for a yelping cur. You will therefore spare your threats. I, however, advise you not to attempt the burning of Mr. Prentiss' property."

"I do not care to accept your advice."

"Also, there is one other quite serious matter. I warn you, on peril of bitter punishment, to not attempt to harm one hair of the heads of Jim Lane's children. They are under my care, and I shall defend them with my life."

Harry spoke strongly, forcibly.

Raymond's face was as black as night. He did not like the turn affairs had taken. He could see that in a measure this cool and daring boy had the forceps on him.

"What are the Lane children to you?" he asked, sneeringly. "I reckoned you're interested in the girl."

Harry's face flushed.

"I have the utmost respect for Miss Leda!" he said, quietly. "At least I have sufficient interest in her to warrant my defending her. I understand, quite well, Alden Raymond, who has wronged these children of an honest but suffering man."

Raymond turned deadly pale.

"You mean to insinuate anything?" he asked, sharply.

"I mean to insinuate nothing, but to denounce you as the responsible man," declared Harry forcibly. "Deny it you cannot, and I tell you there is always a day of retribution for the man who oppresses the weak and the helpless."

Raymond, livid and trembling with hatred and wrath, made a rush at Harry.

"Curses!" he shrieked. "You know too much! You shall die!"

The villain tried to clutch the boy's throat, but Harry drew back and let out with his right fist.

The blow took the villain full in the chest and knocked him down as if he had been struck by a sledge hammer.

"Stand back!" cried Harry, in a ringing voice. "It will be the worse for you."

Raymond, furious and defeated, scrambled to his feet. Deadly hatred was in his heart now.

The murderer's spirit was upon him, and it was his foe's life that he wanted, nothing less.

He drew a pistol from an inner pocket and fired at Harry.

The bullet whistled close by the young fireman's ear. Fortunately it did him no harm.

But it was not the villain's fault that Harry was not killed. Like a meteor the young fireman bore down upon the would-be assassin.

Harry struck the pistol from the villain's grip and gave him a terrific blow upon the head, which stretched him out upon the ground.

"Coward!" cried the young fireman, furiously. "Never dare such a deed as that again."

Savage curses and profane epithets burst from Raymond's lips in volumes. He regained his feet and slunk away.

"Ten thousand curses upon you, Harry Hook," he gritted. "I will get square with you for this if it is a hundred years from now."

"You will get a worse lesson next time!" cried Harry, forcibly. "I advise you to leave this part of the country at once, Alden Raymond. Your room is better than your company."

"I shall stay long enough to freeze you out!" cried the villain, savagely.

Harry would have said more, but at that moment a thrilling sound came to his ears. It was the distant boom of the fire bells.

"A fire!" he gasped. "This is no place for me."

In an instant he was away like a bullet from a gun, on the homeward run. He left Raymond far behind, cursing his stupid luck and realizing the reward of villainy in part.

As Harry bore down toward the city, he could see by the flames that quite a conflagration was in progress.

At that moment a countryman with a young colt hitched to a light gig came along.

Harry rushed out into the street.

"Here, my friend," he cried, "give me a lift into the city. There is a fire going on, and I am chief of No. 1 company and must get there at once."

"Eh? Is that so?" grunted the farmer. "Wall, I'll be goldurned if there ain't a fire a-goin' thar somewheres. So ye're one of the firemen, eh?"

"Yes," replied Harry. "Will you give me the lift?"

"By gosh, you bet I will! I don't keer if I go to the fire myself. Climb in!"

Harry leaped into the gig, the farmer touched the colt with the whip, and the next moment they were going down the road in the darkness like a streak of lightning.

The farmer's colt certainly had the elements of go in him, and Harry Hook owed to a feeling of terror at the reckless methods of the farmer's driving.

But in an incredibly short space of time the main part of the city and the location of the fire was reached.

A stirring scene was there being enacted.

Several fire companies, chief among them being No. 1, were fighting the flames.

As Harry appeared on the scene a wild cheer went up.

Harry Hook knew that there was important work before him, and he did not hesitate to risk his life in any attempt to save the endangered inmates.

CHAPTER VII.

A BRAVE FEAT.

Harry Hook's appearance upon the scene infused the fire companies with new life, and they went to work in lively fashion.

The fire at present was confined to the lower stories of a hotel.

But this endangered the lives of those in the upper stories.

Ladders had been put up in places, and many had been rescued, but it was believed that there were many others asleep in the left wing, which was already hard threatened by the flames.

There was need of some daring spirit to go up to this part of the house and arouse the endangered ones.

Harry Hook saw this, and without hesitation accepted the call of duty.

The stairways were in flames, and there was no way of getting up that way.

Neither could any of those on the upper floors get down.

Harry Hook saw that there was but one way to reach the upper stories, and he called for a ladder.

The young chief's orders were quickly obeyed, and a ladder was placed against the doomed building.

The crowd realized that something unusual was on the tapis, and gaped with all interest at the work going on.

When Harry Hook placed his foot on the lower rung of the ladder they understood what it meant at once.

A cheer went up.

"Good boy, Harry!"

"He's a brave un!"

"You're a hero!"

But Harry Hook heard none of these cries. He went up the ladder like a squirrel and reached a window in the upper story.

He broke the sash with his axe, and leaped through into the room beyond.

All was intense darkness. He could not see his hand before him.

Had the young fireman been other than the brave fellow that he was he would have shrunk from the deadly peril which lay before him.

But he was in the pursuance of his duty, and this was to save human life.

Therefore he pushed on.

He shouted aloud as he entered the room.

But no answer came back.

If the chamber held occupants they did not answer. Harry groped about the room until he found the bed.

But it was empty.

In fact, it was made up, which was evidence that the chamber was an unoccupied one.

Without a moment's further delay in this place, therefore, Harry pushed through and passed into another room.

He realized that it was useless to travel about in the darkness. At his belt was a fireman's lantern, and this he unslung and lit.

Its rays revealed another sleeping room similar to the first.

Harry passed through this, and through a door leading into a corridor.

As he burst open this door he was met with a dense cloud of smoke. For a moment he was obliged to stagger back.

Then he shouted:

"Hello! Is there anybody here?"

He listened a moment, and then received a thrill of horror. For in the distance he heard a faint and anguished voice:

"My God! Will no one help me?"

"Yes," shouted Harry, with tremendous power. "Hold on there, wherever you are. I'll soon be with you."

Then the young fireman plunged into the smoke recklessly.

On he went until he suddenly stumbled over a form in the passage and heard a faint moan.

Harry put down his hand and touched a human form. In a moment the young fireman brought the rays of his lantern down close to the unknown.

Then he saw the pallid, sickly features of a woman of the working class.

Her eyes opened a moment, and she gasped:

"Leave me to die—save yourself!"

"But I am here to save you," cried Harry. "Have courage, my good woman. Let me help you on your feet, and then you shall go with me."

"No," replied the woman faintly. "I cannot stand upon

my feet. I am an invalid and crawled thus far from my bed."

"Good heaven!" exclaimed Harry. "Where are your friends? Did they basely desert you in this manner?"

"They were obliged to save themselves. But it matters not. I have but a little while to live. Let me die."

"Is there no one else on this floor?" asked the young fireman tersely.

"I think not. They were all warned, and made their escape."

"And left you here to die!" cried Harry, indignantly. "The inhuman scoundrels! But I will save you!"

It mattered not to Harry Hook that the woman was an invalid and her life well nigh spent, anyway.

It was a human life, just the same, and it was his duty to preserve it.

Accordingly he lifted the woman in his arms with ease, as she was not heavy.

Back through the corridor he went. It was no load whatever for his strong young frame.

A moment more and he had reached the door of the room against the window of which the ladder rested.

But the moment he kicked open the door he was rewarded with a burst of flame and smoke in the face.

It drove him back, and he saw at a glance that this avenue of escape was cut off.

It was quite useless to think of entering that room now.

A chill of horror seized him.

With his access to the ladder cut off, how was he to escape? Indeed, it seemed an impossibility.

At that moment Harry Hook realized what it meant to face death in its most frightful form.

In fact, there seemed literally no escape for him.

The sick woman seemed to understand the situation, and said:

"Save yourself, brave sir. Leave me to die. I am near my end!"

"Never!" cried Harry resolutely. "I am not that kind, madam."

"But I fear the worst for you. Are we not hemmed in by the fire?"

"It seems so."

"My God! I fear for you. You have incurred all this for my sake. I beg of you to save your life."

"Do not speak of that again!" cried Harry resolutely. "I tell you I will never leave you here to die."

Then the young fireman turned back into the corridor once more.

He thought of every possible avenue of escape. The stairways were choked, the windows were not accessible.

The smoke was growing more dense and the roar of the flames was under their feet.

But Harry Hook had a brave heart. Danger could not daunt him.

He paused a moment, collected his senses, became calm, and then said:

"Madam, can you tell me the way to the roof?"

"Yes," was the reply. "There is a ladder and a scuttle at the lower end of this hall."

Harry experienced a thrill of hope.

It was now only a question as to whether he could reach the end of the hall or not. He made a valiant attempt.

Battling with the smoke, he finally succeeded in doing so.

It was but a moment's work to place the ladder and then mount upward.

He forced the scuttle upward.

The rush of smoke was suffocating, but he staggered upward, and emerged upon the roof at last.

At that instant he was plainly visible from the street below in the awful glare of the burning building itself.

A great cheer went up.

It was seen that Harry Hook had a victim of the flames in his arms. In an instant everybody's sympathy was aroused.

"Save the brave boy!"

"Do not let him perish!"

"Up with the ladders!"

It is needless to say that the firemen worked like beavers. In less time than it takes to tell it, they had spliced ladders and mounted them to the roof.

The fire was very hot under Harry's feet, and he realized that the roof must soon fall in.

There was no time to lose.

He reached the edge of the roof with his burden. Two brave firemen had mounted the ladder, and here relieved him.

The sick woman was passed tenderly down the ladder.

A great and thrilling cheer went up from the crowd. Harry crawled onto the ladder with an effort.

The mental and physical strain had been great. The heat in the burning building had sickened him.

But a gust of cool air revived him, and he slid down the ladder to the ground. No sooner had he done so than the whole roof fell in.

CHAPTER VIII.

A DASTARDLY SHOT.

Harry Hook had been not a moment too soon. Two minutes' further delay and his career would have been ended.

But fate had spared his life for other and equally great deeds.

Once more he had made a hero of himself in the eyes of the people.

His friend crowded about him in legion, and wrung his hands and congratulated him.

But he quickly tore himself away from them and went back to his post of duty. With the caving in of the roof, however, the fire was speedily under control.

It was a late hour when Harry Hook was enabled to leave the scene and wend his way home.

He was much exhausted, and retired at once to his bed.

His sleep was replete with troubled dreams, and not refreshing. At an early hour he arose.

Mrs. Hook was keen enough to see that all was not right with Harry. But neither she nor Leda were able to draw any information from him.

"It is nothing," he declared. "I am just a little unnerved, that is all."

But the subject upon Harry Hook's mind was a weighty one.

The young fireman was in a quandary as to what he had better do about his knowledge of the dark plot against the life of Calvin Prentiss.

At first he was backward about approaching the magnate on the subject. But the more he thought of it the plainer became his duty.

So that when evening came again his mind was fully made up.

"I will visit Mr. Prentiss and give him a warning," he declared. "I will mention no names just at present."

With this intent Harry waited for a seasonable hour, and then, early in the evening, proceeded to Mr. Prentiss' home.

He mounted the doortop and rang the bell.

A servant appeared.

"Is Mr. Prentiss in?" asked Harry.

"Yes," replied the servant. "Have you a card?"

"Pray inform him that Harry Hook wishes to see him!"

"All right, sir."

The servant disappeared. Harry surveyed the elegant mansion, with its fine appointments, and shivered as he thought of its lying a heap of ashes.

The servant now reappeared.

"Mr. Prentiss will see you in the library," he said respectfully.

"Very well."

Harry entered the elegant home of the millionaire. A moment more and he pushed open a door and stood face to face with his good friend.

Mr. Prentiss' face wore a cordial smile, and he extended his hand.

"I am glad to see you, Harry," he said cordially. "Pray come in."

Mr. Prentiss indicated a seat, and Harry sank into it.

The millionaire affected not to notice the anxious look on the young fireman's face.

"Really, this is an unexpected pleasure, Harry," he declared. "You don't come to see me often enough."

"Indeed, Mr. Prentiss, I have called upon—upon business!" stammered Harry.

"Ah, yes; something very important, I presume?"

"Yes."

"Very good, my boy! I shall be pleased to help you in any way I can. By the way, I hear you distinguished yourself again last night!"

Harry blushed brightly.

"You do me too much honor, Mr. Prentiss," he said.

"Ah, but it was a great deed."

"It was only a fireman's duty."

"It is a great thing to always so bravely do one's duty."

"You are very kind," stammered Harry, "but, really, the business I called to see you about is very important."

Mr. Prentiss saw the earnestness in the youth's face, and said seriously:

"Well, Harry, what is it?"

"I—I am pained to say that I have discovered that you have an enemy—a very bad enemy, sir."

In spite of Harry's apparent seriousness, the magnate laughed.

"Well, that is very odd, Harry. Did you not suppose that I had such a thing before?"

"I see no reason why you should have, sir."

"Why?" asked the millionaire in an amused manner.

"You are kind to everybody."

"Ah! But there is such a thing as making an enemy by kindness. Envy makes more foes than anything else."

"I believe you, sir," replied Harry, "and I believe this foe is the outcome of a spirit of envy."

"Ah, who can it be?"

"That I would rather not say."

"Well, that is odd. You come to warn me against a foe, and then will not tell me who he is."

"I have come to tell you that you have a foe, and also to warn you to be watchful and wary. I know of the existence of a plot to burn this house—aye, even more than that, to take your life."

Harry's declaration was dramatic and forceful.

It impressed the millionaire more than could be told in words. He half sprang up from his chair.

His face turned deathly pale.

"Ah! Then you are on the track of these incendiaries?" he asked.

Harry nodded.

"I am," he replied. "I am not yet ready to unmask them. When I do there will be a sensation!"

Mr. Prentiss arose, and coming forward took the young fireman's hand.

"Harry Hook," he said, with great depth of feeling, "you have rendered me a great service. I shall never forget it. I shall always hold you as my best and truest friend."

"Sir," said Harry, in a clear and distinct voice, "I hope that you will. I shall always try and merit your good opinion."

"I will follow your advice and be on my guard."

"I would advise you to put a watch upon this house."

"I will do so."

"Bar your sleeping room door at night. Be careful of your food. If out after dark be wary, and carry a revolver ready for use."

"I will do all that!"

Harry turned to the library door.

"I shall hope to soon see the end of all this rascality," he declared firmly. "If it is in my power to do so, I shall soon bring the rascals to justice."

Harry had barely finished his speech when he received a thrilling shock.

The library was a long room upon the east side of the house. Joined to it was a beautiful conservatory.

Through one of the glass windows Harry suddenly saw a hand grasping a revolver protrude.

In a flash he saw the awful danger, and gasped:

"Mr. Prentiss, look out!"

But just as the words left his lips there was a loud report, and a crashing of glass followed. Harry felt the bullet hiss by his ear.

The young fireman was as intrepid as a lion.

Quick and fearless to act, he dashed straight for the conservatory. He burst through the array of potted plants.

Just leaping through the window was a dark-clad man, wearing a mask.

The young fireman did not hesitate, but went through the window after him like a thunderbolt.

Both alighted upon the green sward without at about the same time.

Like a panther Harry was upon the dastardly assailant. He bore him backwards for a moment.

It seemed for an instant as if the young fireman had the best of the struggle.

But only for a moment.

The other was extremely supple, and made a tremendous effort to throw Harry off. But the youth clung tightly.

Once the unknown spoke.

"Curse ye!" he gritted, "let go of me or I'll kill ye!"

"Never!" cried Harry, "I mean to know who you are and to bring you to justice. You are a murderous scoundrel!"

In vain Harry tried to get the mask from the other's face. He failed in each instance.

The struggle was a brief one, yet an extremely desperate one.

Up and down they swayed, now one having the advantage, then the other. Suddenly the villain broke away.

Before Harry could do aught to stop him, he had slipped away in the darkness.

Mr. Prentiss now appeared by Harry's side.

"He got away from you, did he, my boy?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Harry, with the keenest of disappointment. "I should like to have seen his face."

The wish was seconded by Mr. Prentiss. They stood there for a moment in silence. Then the millionaire turned to enter the house.

CHAPTER IX.

ASTONISHING EVENTS.

Mr. Prentiss was deeply agitated.

"Come into the house, Harry," he said.

"No, I thank you," replied the young fireman. "It is time for me to be at home."

The magnate pressed Harry's hand.

"I understand what you have said, my boy," he declared, "and I shall be on my guard. Do you think that the shot was really intended for you?"

"Oh, yes," replied Harry.

"Why," exclaimed the magnate in amazement, "have they designs on your life as well?"

"That shot was prompted by the exigency of the moment," replied Harry. "The rascal overheard our conversation. It angered him, and he tried to annihilate me."

"God be praised that you escaped," said the magnate fervently.

A short while later Harry Hook was on his way home.

When he entered the house he was met by Mrs. Hook.

There was a light of excitement in the old lady's eyes. Harry saw it, and secretly wondered.

"I am so glad you have come, Harry," she said. "We have had startling news since you went away."

"Startling news!" exclaimed Harry, in amazement.

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"Come into the sitting room."

Harry followed his mother into the sitting room. The orphan children, Leda and Jack, rushed into his arms.

Harry saw that Leda had been weeping and seemed much excited. Jack, however, was all smiles.

"What is the matter?" cried the young fireman cheerily. "Has anything unusual happened since I have been gone?"

"Indeed, there has," said Leda, with choking sobs, "and, oh, Harry, I am so afraid that they will shoot him!"

The young fireman was astounded.

"Shoot him!" he exclaimed, in amazement. "What do you mean?"

"Give Harry the newspaper, Leda," said Mrs. Hook. "Let him read for himself."

Harry took the paper handed him, and almost the first thing his gaze encountered was a large heading, the reading of which startled him.

Thus it read:

"A DARING ESCAPE!"

"The Pluck of a Twenty-Year Prisoner. How He Broke From the State Prison. James Lane, the Forger, at Large. Five Thousand Dollars Reward!"

"This reward is offered for the capture of James Lane, the escaped prisoner from the State Prison yesterday. Never in the annals of the prison has a more daring break for liberty been made.

"At 4:30 o'clock yesterday morning, as the turnkey was passing the cell of Lane, he was impelled by some premonition to glance through the grated door.

"There he saw the evidences of a daring break. The iron bars of the window had been sawed, the ropes of the bed had been extracted and used as a means of descent fifty feet to the roof below.

"This roof overhangs the swirling current of the Black Hole River. It is supposed that Lane leaped from the dizzy height of forty feet into the current of the river.

"It was certainly taking a desperate chance for liberty, and it is not known yet that the prisoner may not be at the bottom of the river.

"None but a strong swimmer could have hoped to breast the current and reach the other shore.

"Yet Lane is known to have been such. It is more than even chances that he is at large. A rich reward is offered for his capture.

"James Lane, widely known as an adroit forger, is serving a twenty years' sentence. Seven years of it have expired, and, with commutation for good behavior, only seven more remained for him to serve.

Though regarded as a desperate criminal, adjudged by the evidence brought against him at the trial, Lane has been a tractable prisoner.

"Indeed, his conduct has been such as to win the sympathy of prison officials, many of whom doubted his guilt. It is hinted in police circles that here may be found the real reason for escape. Several of the prison guards are suspected of leniency, and will be given a hearing at an early day.

"Lane was given to fits of despondency, and at such times his grief was painful to witness. When the news of the death of his wife reached him he was nearly crushed. He is known to have two children dependent upon charity somewhere in the cold world.

"There is, and always has been doubts as to Lane's guilt, the peculiar circumstances of his case being remembered well. It is expected to have the prisoner again in limbo before many hours."

Harry read the account through the startled feelings and utter amazement. For a moment he stood like a statue; then he turned to Leda.

"Your father?" he exclaimed.

"Yes," sobbed the girl. "Oh, I so fear that he will resist the officers when caught and be harmed. Oh, my father! Believe me, dear friends, he is not a guilty man!"

Harry Hook drew his handsome form up.

"Of course he is not!" he cried, with flashing eyes. "I am glad that he escaped, and if I can help him to get out of the country I will do it."

A glad cry burst from Leda's lips.

"What is more," cried Harry, with ringing scorn, "it is an inhuman thing to sentence a man to such a term for such an offense when the evidence was not conclusive. Those jury-men were blockheads."

"You are right, my son!" cried Mrs. Hook, with vigor for a woman of her age. "I have always believed James Lane innocent."

"So have I," cried Harry, "and if he should come here to this house I would shield him as sure——"

Harry went no further.

At that moment a loud uproar was heard in the street.

There was the sound of skurrying feet, loud shouts and the crack of a pistol.

An awful cry escaped Leda's lips.

"Oh, my father!" she screamed. "I know it is him. They are chasing him."

Harry Hook uttered not a word, but sprang for the front door.

There was a vestibule before the door, and it was as dark as a pocket as Harry passed through it.

Out upon the steps rushed the young fireman.

Officers with drawn revolvers were rushing down the street, and people were collecting by hundreds.

"What is the matter?" asked Harry of a man on the sidewalk.

"They are after a feller," was the reply.

"Who is he?"

"I heard 'em telling about Lane, the forger, who escaped from the State Prison only yesterday."

Harry's whole sympathy was aroused. His heart went out to the fugitive.

"If I can help him, I will," he muttered, and back up the steps he ran.

But in the vestibule now he saw a shrinking form. It glided into the hall, and a man's pallid face was revealed to the lamplight.

"Friends, I am in a tight place," he said hoarsely and pleadingly. "The world is against me, though I never harmed any one in my life. But I heard you say you would help me!"

For a moment Harry Hook stood like one dazed.

Then Mrs. Hook shrieked:

"James Lane! Don't you know me?"

The fugitive gave a gasping cry. He threw off his long cloak.

"Friends!" he gasped. "God be praised! I am safe."

Then he stopped, and for a moment gasped for breath. He had caught sight of the two children.

"God in Heaven!" he uttered. "Am I dreaming? My own children."

Leda and Jack, with joyful cries rushed to their father's arms. But at that moment there came a thundering rap upon the front door.

CHAPTER X.

THE INCENDIARIES' WORK.

With the rap upon the door James Lane started to his feet.

A wild, hunted light came again into his eyes.

"My God! they have tracked me here, human blood-hounds that they are. But I will never be taken alive!"

"Oh, papa!" screamed Leda. "Fly—fly for your life! You must not stay here."

Harry Hook closed the hall door and barred it.

"Mother," he said resolutely, and with great quickness, "you know the cedar closet and the place where people who lived here before us used to hide their silver?"

Mrs. Hook did know.

She seized the fugitive's arm.

"Come with me!" she said, breathlessly. "We will save you!"

Up the front stairs James Lane went with Mrs. Hook.

Harry waited a moment, and then, with well assumed calmness, threw open the street door.

Two officers stood upon the threshold.

"Mr. Hook," said one of them sternly, "we have been informed that a suspicious looking character has just entered your house."

"Indeed!" said Harry, coolly. "I suppose you know my character?"

"We do," replied the officer, respectfully, "but we must do our duty."

"What do you mean?"

"We must search your house."

"What for?"

"For some trace of James Lane, the forger. It is believed that he has come here to see his children, who are in your charge."

Harry threw wide open the door.

"I invite you to enter," he said, coolly. "Do what you please. The children are badly frightened, as you will find. You will not find Jim Lane here."

"Ah!" said the officer, shortly. "Is he here?"

Harry on principle would not lie.

"I decline to answer so rude a question," he said, stiffly. "It is for you to search and find out."

The two officers passed into the house with this.

They proceeded to make a thorough search of the premises. Harry and his mother, with the two children, waited in the sitting room below.

For some time the officers kept up the quest.

They finally became satisfied that they were not on the right track and gave up the quest.

But as the chief of police came down the stairs he gazed penetratingly at Harry and said:

"Harry Hook, you have the reputation of being an honest boy."

"I hope so," replied the young fireman.

"Now, you must tell the truth. Has not Jim Lane found shelter in this house?"

"You have not found him here," replied Harry, evasively.

"But has he not been here?"

"I decline to answer that question," replied Harry.

"Come, this is not right," said the officer, sternly. "You are thwarting justice. Tell me where he is."

"Sir," replied the young fireman, resolutely, "if I really knew where he was I would not tell you."

"You would not?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I think James Lane is entitled to the greatest of sympathy. He is a deeply wronged and much maligned man, and the victim of one of the foulest of conspiracies."

"You believe that?"

"I do."

"Then you will not tell me where he is?"

"No."

The officer shrugged his shoulders.

"You may be sorry for this, Harry Hook. Public opinion will be against you."

"I don't care for public opinion or anything else in undermining a principle I believe to be right," cried the young fireman.

The officer said no more, but passed from the house. In a short while the street was clear, and Harry believed that danger was past.

Then Mrs. Hook went upstairs to release the fugitive from his hiding place.

But before she returned a startling thing happened. A startling sound burst upon the night air.

It was the distant sound of the fire bells.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

From the street came the cry:

"Fire! Fire!"

In an instant Harry was upon his feet. Duty was paramount now. Off came his coat and on went his fireman's jacket and helmet.

He rushed to the door and out into the street.

"Fire! Fire! Fire!"

The cry was carried from street to street. People were running, teams were flying, the greatest excitement was in progress.

Harry saw the distant blaze against the sky.

He gave one look, and then was off like a bullet from a gun. Down the street he flew like a meteor.

He was a lively sprinter, and soon had reached the street in which was the engine house.

Several of the boys were already there and getting out the fire engine. Harry caught hold of the end of the large rope and carried it into the street.

Bill Bence, one of the veterans, was by Harry's side, and the boy chief had time to ask:

"Where is the fire, Bill?"

"Massy on us, Hal," replied the old fireman, "that's hard to say, but I heard some one yell out that it was the oil works."

"The oil works!" gasped Harry. "My God, that means ruin to the town, desolation and loss of life. We must get there the quickest way. Lively, all!"

Every instant fresh men were arriving. In a few moments enough were on the line to easily draw the engine."

Then away they went at a mad pace, Harry Hook with his trumpet in the lead.

A great crowd followed, and the air was filled with shouts and cries and a din most indescribable. And still everywhere arose that ominous cry:

"Fire! Fire!"

As Harry dashed on a thousand vague ideas were flashing through his mind.

The fire in his earnest belief was the work of incendiaries.

That Jim Bisbee had made a strike the young fireman felt sure.

He knew instinctively that much depended upon him now.

If the oil works were indeed ablaze, then the result bid fair to be most serious.

That a good part of the town would succumb seemed almost certain. A species of mingled desperation and horror was upon the young fire chief.

On, on, faster yet went the boys of No. 1. Panting, almost ready to drop with exhaustion, they came in sight of the fire.

In spite of this, however, they rallied with a loud cheer, and swept on to the scene of the fire.

Down went the long lines of hose. Fresh men were on hand, and the work began.

The flames were raging in one end of a large warehouse.

It was not fifty yards from the main oil tanks of the company. Should the fire reach them an explosion would follow, and the result could be nothing but serious.

Harry Hook saw the situation at a glance.

In an instant his plans were laid, and he set about carrying them out.

If the fire could be confined to the warehouse, the oil tanks might be saved and the mighty catastrophe averted.

At this moment Mr. Prentiss came upon the scene. The millionaire was beside himself with terror and despair.

He rushed to Harry's side.

"This is Bisbee's work!" he cried. "My boy, you must foil him. If we can save the day now, we will take vigorous measures to terminate his villainous career.

"I will do my best!" was Harry Hook's firm reply.

CHAPTER XI.

SEARCHING FOR THE INCENDIARIES.

Some of the crowd heard this and cheered wildly. It gave the firemen fresh inspiration.

In directing the movements of his men Harry showed himself a born fire fighter. He deployed a line of men on ladders over the eastern roof of the warehouse, and then sent axmen inside the building to break down the partitions.

In this manner the fire was kept within a small compass.

Here it was stubbornly fought, inch by inch. It was, however, a hard fight.

The flames for a time did not seem disposed to yield. Four or five times they communicated with the main building, but each time, by hard work, they were fought back.

Mr. Prentiss was a spectator of the contest, and words could not express his delight when he finally saw the fire under control.

Every one was willing to admit that it was Harry's plucky work that had done it.

Cheers were given lustily for the brave fireman when the fire was finally extinguished in whole. But this was not all.

Public sentiment was thoroughly aroused. It required but a spark to kindle the smoldering flame.

Calvin Prentiss mounted a wagon seat and addressed the crowd fervidly.

"It is time," he said, "that this gang of incendiaries was exterminated, root and branch. Oilville will never be safe until Jim Bisbee stretches hemp. The sooner we make an effort to that end the better."

"Hurrah! Hurrah!" shouted the crowd.

"Lead us on!"

"We're ready to volunteer!"

"Wipe out the skunks!"

These were the excited cries which were a positive index to the feelings of all. The feeling was of the bitterest kind.

"I call for one hundred armed men!" cried Mr. Prentiss. "We will make sure work of them. I want none but brave men!"

In a very few moments the band of vigilants was organized.

The fire was now under control. Harry Hook joined the volunteers.

Arms were procured, and then a course outlined. It was decided to proceed at once to Black Cap.

Every foot of the region was to be scoured in quest for the incendiaries. No stone was to be left unturned.

There was not time or opportunity for Harry to send word home of his undertaking, nor did he attempt to do so.

It was now broad daylight, and the start was at once made.

Away marched the band of avengers out of the town. A mob of excited, yet deadly resolute men they were.

Soon the open country was reached, and the river was crossed and Black Cap was approached.

The bald crowned mountain loomed up before them like a grim sentinel barring their way.

It was a lonesome country round about Black Cap.

There were a few woodsmen at its base, but it was seldom that the fastnesses of its summit were visited, save by the hunter.

Deep caverns and precipitous chasms were known to exist there, and it was among these that Bisbee and his gang had made their hiding place.

But the excited miners were determined to scour every foot of the place to root out the villainous gang.

Reaching the base of the mountain, a plan of procedure was considered.

It was decided to separate and go up the mountain in a line. The signal to be given in case of the discovery of the incendiaries' den was to be a peculiar whistle.

With this question settled, the exploration was begun.

Harry Hook was one of the line, and made his way through the thick underbrush and over the huge boulders with difficulty for over an hour.

Then a distant signal was heard.

Also from the distance came the report of firearms. At once shouts came from every direction.

A general rush was made for the spot where the sounds of the conflict were to be heard.

Harry Hook was one of the first to arrive on the scene.

At the base of a high cliff several of the miners were grouped about one of their number, who lay prostrate on the ground.

To his horror, Harry saw by his white, blood-streaked face and a wound in the temple that he was dead.

Harry quickly learned the full particulars of the affair. It seemed that Mason, which was the miner's name, had been climbing the mountain when the fatal shot was fired from a point above.

To the first one who reached his side, and just as death came upon him, he declared that it was Bisbee who had fired at him.

Vengeful, indeed, were the feelings of the miners now.

With new and deadly resolution they renewed the search.

But the tricky Bisbee had made sure of his safety in a hiding place which they were unable to find.

Search as they might, not a trace of the incendiaries could be found. Later in the day it was necessary to give up the quest.

The chagrin and discomfiture of all cannot be expressed in words.

Slowly and sadly the return to Oilville was made, with the dead body of poor Mason on a stretcher.

Harry Hook was, perhaps, the most disappointed of any.

He went directly to the engine house, and there he met Mr. Prentiss.

The millionaire was very much excited and became at once depressed in spirits when he learned that the quest had been futile.

"What is to become of us?" he cried, in despair. "Why, at this rate the town is wholly at the mercy of that gang."

"Indeed, it looks like it, sir," agreed Harry, gloomily.

"Is there no way to capture those villains and bring them to justice?"

"There ought to be!"

"Can you suggest a plan, my lad?"

Harry was thoughtful.

"It looks as if it might be easy to decoy Bisbee down here and entrap him," he declared, finally.

"Good! But how will you do it?"

"I am not prepared to say just now," said Harry. "I will try and think up a plan."

"I tell you immediate action is very necessary. See what I found in my letter box this morning!"

The millionaire took from his pocket a paper, and held it up.

Upon it in red letters was rudely printed the following:

"WARNING!"

"One more chance. Last night we tried to fire the oil works. We failed, but the next time we will succeed. Vengeance is the cry of
One of the Oppressed."

"What do you think of that?" asked Mr. Prentiss, sharply. "That's a nice message to receive, eh?"

"That is Bisbee's work," was Harry's comment.

"Yes, of course. But I want to ask you if it does not look like the work of a madman?"

"I should say it did," replied Harry. "Yet, I can hardly believe the villain insane."

At that moment a ragged boy dashed into the engine house and handed Harry a note.

The young fireman tore it open and read:

"Harry—Come home just as quick as you can. I feel sure that something has happened to Leda and Jack.

"From Your Mother."

Harry Hook's face turned deadly white.

"My God!" he gasped. "Has Alden Raymond got in his villainous work?"

Then out of the engine house he rushed full tilt.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MURDERER'S HAND.

Harry Hook's sensations were far beyond expression as he rushed out of the engine house.

All sorts of horrified reflections passed through his mind.

"Something has happened to Leda and Jack!" he muttered, as he sped on. "If you have done them harm, Mr. Alden Raymond, woe to you."

The next moment the young fireman turned into the street in which was their home.

A few moments later he reached the door.

Up the steps he sped, but before he could throw himself against the door it opened, and Mrs. Hook stood upon the threshold.

The good woman was pale and distraught.

"Mother!" gasped Harry. "You sent for me?"

"Yes," replied the good woman. "Thank God you have come."

"But tell me quick, has harm come to Leda and Jack?"

"I know not."

"Tell me all—quickly."

"When you rushed out to the fire James Lane followed you. That was the last I saw of him. Little Jack was low, but I warned him not to. However, he was unawares a little later. As he did not return, I went out to find him. Neither have returned, and I fear harm has come to them."

"My God! It is more than likely that Raymond has his clutches upon them."

"So I fear."

"You do not know where Jack intended to go?"

"After his father, I suppose."

Harry started down the steps.

"Where are you going, my son?" asked the anxious

"To find them, if such a thing is possible."

"Be careful of yourself!"

"Never fear."

Harry shot a loving glance at his mother and was away.

Down the street he dashed at full speed. He had but one thought uppermost in his mind, and this was to find Alden Raymond.

He felt certain that the villain had stolen them away, and perhaps done them harm.

Harry's blood was boiling.

"If he has harmed them," he muttered, "it will be a bad thing for him. I will not rest until he is punished."

As chance had it, just as he turned into the main street of the town he came face to face with Raymond.

The villain was leisurely walking along and did not appear disposed to recognize the young fireman.

He bestowed upon him simply a cold stare.

He grabbed him by the arm and cried, forcibly:

"Look here, you graceless scoundrel, you are not getting away. I want."

"Unhand me, you uncivil fool!" cried Raymond, savagely. "I'll blow your head off if you don't!"

A revolver flashed in the villain's hand.

But Harry, with a blow of his hand, dashed it into the gutter.

"None of that!" he cried, as he backed Raymond up against a building.

The villain struggled to break loose, but could not. Harry held him as in a vise.

"What do you want?" he snarled.

The young fireman placed one sturdy fist in close proximity to the wretch's eye.

"Now, I want the truth from you, Alden Raymond, or I will pound you to jelly," said Harry, forcibly. "I want to know what you have done with Jack and Leda."

Raymond's eyes glittered for a moment in a lurid way, then he muttered:

"I don't know anything about them. You know more than I do."

"You lie!" cried the young fireman, vigorously. "Tell me the truth! Where are they?"

"I don't know!"

"Do you mean that?"

"Yes."

Just at this moment a policeman hove around the corner. A crowd was also beginning to collect.

"Help! Police!" cried Raymond, vigorously. "Pull him off, or I shall be killed."

Harry was so righteously indignant at the villain that he could not forbear giving him an extra shaking.

The next moment he was thrust aside by the policeman.

Harry was in no mood to abandon his war with Raymond, but yet he saw it was folly to dare the law.

So he fell back.

"What's this?" cried the officer, harshly. "Disturbin' the peace, ye? I'll have ye both arrested and locked up if ye go on."

"He assaulted me!" cried Raymond. "I make the law against him! Do your duty, officer, and lock him up!"

The officer regarded Harry and then Raymond critically.

As it happened, he knew the young fireman well. He gave Harry the wink, and then said roughly to Raymond:

"I reckon ye ain't hurt! Go on now, and don't make a crowd! Do ye hear me?"

The officer brandished his club and Raymond did go on.

Harry also turned away, sick at heart and still as much in the fate of Leda and Jack as before.

That Raymond was concerned in the disappearance of the children.

Following his footsteps," he concluded. "Perhaps in that way I can find out something."

He went on about with this purpose in mind.

Raymond had disappeared.

He could find no trace of the villain.

At this moment a crowd in the distance attracted Harry's attention.

It was at the far end of the street and upon the verge of the mill pond. Impelled by a strange motive, Harry went thither.

Some men had just dragged an object ashore from the water.

It was a limp little form, evidently that of a little child. Expressions of horror and pity went up.

An awful sense of suffocation seized Harry. He was unable to make a move.

"God! Can it be?" he finally muttered. "I will not believe so."

The awful fascination drew him to the spot.

Right to the little dead form he went. It was that of a boy, as he could see, and one glance at the still features brought an awful cry from Harry's lips.

"My soul! It is little Jack!"

The crowd fell back before the agonized young fireman. He knelt down over the drowned boy and chafed his hands and tried to call life back.

But it was useless. Little Jack Lane was dead. Was his death accidental, or was it the murderer's hand?

The crowd stood about, hushed and deeply impressed.

"Ye know the little feller?" asked one of the men who had recovered the body.

"I do," replied Harry in a rigid voice. "Where was the boy when you found him?"

"He was caught on a beam in the flume over yonder."

"Ah! Did you see him fall in?"

"No. I reckon he's been in the water several hours."

"It is murder, then!" cried Harry vehemently.

A sensation was created.

"Oh, I reckon not, sir," remonstrated the man. "Likely the little fellow was playing on the logs and fell in."

Harry bent down and tore aside little Jack's jacket collar.

"Look!" he cried harshly. "Does that look like it?"

There, plainly visible in the soft flesh of the boy's throat, were the blue prints of human fingers.

It was a tell-tale mark, and a thrill of awful horror went through the crowd.

"Murder!"

"Yes," cried Harry Hook, with fearful earnestness, "and I know the murderer."

Before any in the crowd could meet this announcement there was a hoarse, awful cry, and a man burst through the throng.

"Don't tell me that is my little Jack! God is not so cruel. Make way! I must see him!"

Harry Hook reeled as he recognized the newcomer.

It was James Lane.

The escaped convict's face was ashen hued and agonized.

He rushed forward and threw himself upon the ground beside the little dead form. His grief was pitiable to witness.

"Oh, my boy, my little Jack!" he wailed. "You are lost to me forever. Gone, gone, and curses on your murderer; the world is not so wide, life is not so short that I shall not live to avenge your death!"

For a moment Harry Hook was wholly in a quandary as to what was the best thing to do.

He realized in an instant with full force the awful danger to which Mr. Lane was exposing himself.

The coroner and officers of the law were approaching. Harry, with an effort, bent down and placed a hand upon the agonized father's shoulder.

"Mr. Lane, listen to me!" he said.

The distraught father ventured to lift his head, and gazing into Harry's face, cried:

"Oh, God! You cannot know the agony of my heart!"

"Yes, it is hard," agreed Harry, "but remember, Mr. Lane, liberty is worth more to you than aught else just now."

"Liberty!" exclaimed the escaped convict in a hushed voice. "Oh, God, how hard I have worked for it."

"Then I adjure you to be brave and discreet or you will lose it."

"Lose it?"

Lane looked about him in a bewildered way.

"Yes; the officers of the law are coming."

This had its effect upon the agonized man. He arose and tottered back into the crowd.

All this Harry hoped had had not been understood by the crowd. He would have tried to induce Lane to seek safety in flight, but in some manner the crowd hid him from view.

At this moment, also, the coroner and the officers came up.

The usual form was gone through with by the coroner. Witnesses were held, and arrangements for an inquest made.

"It is likely an accidental death!" said one of the officers.

Harry overheard this, and very indiscreetly said:

"No; it is murder!"

In an instant every eye was upon him.

CHAPTER XIII.

FACE TO FACE.

Harry Hook arose from over little Jack Lane's dead form, and his face was pale and rigid.

"Murder!" exclaimed one of the officers. "Who are you?"

"My name is Harry Hook."

"You are the young fireman of whom so much has been said lately?"

"I am a fireman," replied Harry.

"What do you know about this case?"

"Very little. I may have spoken inadvisedly, yet I am afraid you will overlook the fact that this was a case of murder."

"Indeed! What prompts you to believe it murder?"

"Look at the boy's throat."

The coroner and officers did so.

"The lad was strangled," declared the coroner. "There are finger marks on his throat!"

Then he turned to Harry.

"Do you know what the lad's name is?" he asked.

"Yes."

Harry then detailed the story of Leda and Jack Lane. He told the history of the waifs with a pathos that touched all in the crowd.

"Indeed, it is a sad story," declared the coroner, sympathetically; "but who do you think could have been so base as to commit this deed? What enemy did the little fellow have?"

The question was put in a tone of voice loud enough to be heard by all in the crowd.

For a moment Harry hesitated to answer. Then a startling incident occurred.

There was a sharp exclamation, and a man burst through the crowd. His face was pallid and distressed, his hair disheveled, and he riveted his sunken, burning eyes upon the coroner.

"I can tell you!" he cried, in a resonant voice.

Harry gave a gasping cry of horror. It was James Lane.

Unable to restrain himself longer, the heartbroken, anguished parent had broken through the crowd with this denunciation.

"Yes," he repeated fiercely, as he noted the coroner's amazement. "I can tell you the name of little Jack's enemy and the hound who would be capable of taking his little life. You all have heard of him. It is Alden Raymond!"

A sensation was created.

Harry tried in vain by sign and look to warn the reckless man from thus betraying himself.

But Lane was thoroughly aroused, and would not have listened to reason.

"That is a strong statement to make, sir," said the coroner. "Have you the evidence?"

"I have it in a thousand ways," cried the temporarily insane father.

"What is your name? Who are you?"

"Who am I?" cried Lane excitedly. "By all that is just and right, I am that dead child's natural defender. I am his father!"

There was a commotion in the crowd.

Then from the throng a man stepped forth. It was Alden Raymond. There was a cynical smile upon his face.

"Hearing my name used in connection with this miserable affair," he declared, "I step forth to defend myself. I wish to say that I am in no way connected with this matter. It cannot be proved against me!"

James Lane drew himself up to his full height. Each man shot a glance of recognition at each other.

It was the meeting of sworn foes after years. There was nothing but deadly hatred between them, each thirsting for the life of the other.

"Alden Raymond, scoundrel and murderer!"

The villain winced beneath this terrible accusation, but he only smiled in a cynical way; and turned to the officers.

"Are you men fools that you cannot see your duty? Do you

know who that fellow is? He is James Lane, the forger and escaped convict."

A startled cry went up.

"James Lane, the forger!"

The officers forgot the inquest and all else in their excitement. The knowledge that it was in their power to re-arrest James Lane, the escaped convict, was paramount.

But the convict saw the situation at a glance, and realized that his freedom was about to be denied to him again. He had not sought to escape this time. Little Jack's sad fate had made him insane and reckless.

But now all the love of freedom came back to him again.

CHAPTER XIV.

A HEATED CONTROVERSY.

A fearful spasm seemed to seize James Lane, the convict.

His hand closed and relaxed like the action of a maniac, and he glared at the man who had wrecked his life with a terrible hatred.

He seemed hardly able to restrain himself from leaping upon his foe, but at the moment the officers seized him.

The chief of police confronted him, and said sternly:

"What have you to say? Do you admit that you are James Lane?"

The wretched man drew himself up.

"May I speak a few words?" he asked, in a hoarse, constrained voice.

"Certainly."

The crowd was intensely interested. A hush fell upon them.

"Then I will tell you a story which will stir your hearts," said Lane forcefully. "Do you see yonder man? He is responsible for my misery; he is guilty of the blackest crimes in the calendar.

"You know him to be a respectable man of wealth. He is in reality a scoundrel, and murderer.

"He is was who sent me to State's prison innocent of a crime. He broke up my family, drove my wife to the grave, threw my beloved children into the horrors of gutter life, and now has crowned all by murdering my little Jack.

"Oh, you may wince, coward and assassin; the guilt is stamped upon your miserable countenance. You have wronged me; but listen! There is a God, and a just Master, and He has promised me that I shall live—live to win my vengeance. There is a reckoning day for you, Alden Raymond, and some day I shall have justice."

"Raymond, throughout this speech, had stood gazing at his accuser with a stony glare of hatred.

Every eye was upon him, and not a few felt inclined to sympathize with Lane.

But the villain turned and said, with mock pity, to the officers:

"It is evident that the fellow is mad. Take him to some asylum."

Manacles were put upon the prisoner's wrists, and he was led sadly away.

The body of little Jack was taken to the undertaker's, pending an inquest. Harry had agreed to pay the burial expenses, and wanted the funeral from his own home.

But just as they were dispersing from the banks of the mill-pond, Harry caught a glimpse of Raymond.

He managed to pass near enough to the villain to say:

"It will be well for you to let Leda return to her home. May God pardon you for what you have already done, but if you harm Leda, may God help you! I shall never leave your track."

"Who are you?" hissed the villain savagely. "It is presumption, indeed, for you to talk to me, you pauper. Why, I have money and influence enough to banish you forever from these parts. I shall make you fear me."

Harry laughed scornfully.

"I would be a coward, indeed, to fear you!" he declared. "I can hate and despise you, but fear you, never!"

"You shall smart for your treatment of me to-day, Harry Hook."

"Bah! That for your threats!"

Harry made his way sadly homeward.

Mrs. Hook was terrible shocked when she learned the fate of poor little Jack. The good woman was quite overcome.

"And poor James is back in prison!" she said. "Ah, me! What trouble is his! If Alden Raymond is the murderer of little Jack, I shudder for when he stands before his God!"

"Retribution will overtake him," affirmed Harry earnestly.

For several days Harry kept up the futile search for Leda Lane. The police were enlisted, but all efforts were of no avail.

The young fireman was discouraged and despondent.

"I fear the worst!" he declared. "Ah, it must, indeed, be true that Leda is dead."

Harry expected every moment to hear of the young girl's body being found, even as Jack's had been.

But this did not happen, and Leda's disappearance remained a mystery.

But in the meanwhile other things of an exciting sort were happening.

The evening after the finding of Jack's body and the re-arrest of Lane, Harry had occasion to visit Mr. Prentiss.

The servant seated him in the library. As chance had it, the millionaire and his junior partner, Alden Raymond, were in a side room.

They were indulging in a heated discussion, every word of which came to Harry. He would not have listened but for his knowledge of Raymond and the fear that he might do Mr. Prentiss harm.

Also, the conversation in part concerned him, and this warranted him somewhat in listening.

"I have just reasons, Alden Raymond, for distrusting you," Mr. Prentiss was saying. "I believe that you are a traitor to my interests."

"Oh, of course," sneered Raymond, contemptuously. "You had better take into partnership that brave boy fireman, pauper and upstart as he is."

"Do you allude to Harry Hook?"

"I believe that is the impudent young cub's name."

"Then I would advise you to pattern after that noble lad. You can well afford to do it."

"No, thank you! I was born a gentleman!"

Harry's cheeks burned, and he with extreme difficulty restrained himself from confronting his insulter.

But better sense prevailed, and he refrained.

He had a valiant defender, however, in Mr. Prentiss.

"I tell you I will hear no aspersions cast upon the character of that lad. I owe him much. He has saved me from ruin a number of times."

Raymond laughed cynically.

"What are you going to do about it?" he asked.

Mr. Prentiss was exceedingly angry.

"We will not discuss Harry Hook further," he said coldly. "Let us return to that matter of the forged draft."

"Well, the detectives have got no clew to the forger ye!" snarled Raymond.

"You are right enough. I am of the opinion that they never will get the right clew."

"Ah!" exclaimed Raymond, turning shortly about. "Why so?"

"The rascal who forged that draft is too near home."

There was an indescribable light in Raymond's eyes.

For a moment his face paled. But he quickly recovered himself.

"What do you mean?" he asked hoarsely. "Is that intended for a personal remark?"

"You may accept it so if you choose."

"I am insulted."

"I think you can stand it."

"Well, I will not stand it!" blustered Raymond. "It is an insinuation that I forged the check."

"Perhaps so."

"Jupiter! What an improbable thing that I should forge a check upon a firm of which I am a member."

"It is not improbable," returned Mr. Prentiss, calmly but rigidly. "You have each quarter far overdrawn your share of the profits. The check would only be a method of increasing your revenue at my expense."

Raymond's face was livid.

"Zounds!" he hissed. "You dare to face me with such an accusation!"

"Easy!" said the millionaire, coolly. "I never make mistakes. Long ago I adopted the motto, 'Be sure you're right, then go ahead!' I will not face you with this accusation without proof to back it."

"Proof?"

"Yes, undisputed proof, which a detective placed in my hands to-day."

The effect of this upon the villain was terrible to witness. A murderous light came into his eyes.

CHAPTER XV.

THE MASK OFF.

It was very clear to Alden Raymond that he was unmasked.

He read it in the accusing glance of his partner, and he had no defense to offer.

His cowardly, craven soul withered within him, and he gave way to a desperate, mad sense of hatred.

Foam flecks appeared upon his lips, and his eyes glared madly.

"Curse you! Then you put a detective on my track?"

"I did," replied Mr. Prentiss, calmly.

"You have manifested great confidence in your own partner."

"My former partner," said Mr. Prentiss in a voice like steel. "I disclaim you as a partner after this."

Raymond was livid.

"Ah! You do, eh?"

"I do."

"How can you do that?"

"You remember the terms of our partnership. You had but little money, and I reserved the right to dissolve the contract at any time that I might see fit."

"You did. Then you mean to dissolve it now?"

"I do. From this hour, Alden Raymond, your interests and mine stand divided. I will owe you as a partner no longer."

"You dare not cast me off!"

"I dare!"

"It will ruin you! Ah, Calvin Prentiss, you may think I am a fool, but I have not been idle all these years. Try to cut me off if you dare!"

"What do you mean?"

"You shall learn. You will find very shortly that I have the upper hand and I will hold to it."

"I defy you."

"You do?"

"Yes, for with this crime of forgery proved against you, I can send you to prison for ten years!"

This was too much for the black passion of the wretch.

Hatred and murder gleamed from his evil eyes. He glared at the millionaire like a madman.

"Now who has the best of the situation?" cried Mr. Prentiss, triumphantly.

"You shall never do that!" yelled the villain, "for I will put you where you can do no harm. Curses on you, take that!"

A long knife gleamed in the wretch's hand. He made a spring forward, and was upon the millionaire like a panther.

That moment would have been Calvin Prentiss' last, but for an unlooked-for intervention.

A light form sped across the room.

The deadly knife was dashed from his grasp, and Raymond was hurled across the room.

Obediently stood Harry Hook, white-faced but determined. He had been just in time to save the life of Mr. Prentiss.

"Coward and murderer!" cried the young fireman. "At last you are unmasked."

Raymond cowered in a heap upon the carpeted floor.

He did not dare move or speak, but glared at Harry Hook like a hunted wild beast.

"Harry Hook!" exclaimed the millionaire joyfully. "You have saved my life."

"With God's help, sir," replied the young fireman. "It was a close call."

"I shall never forget it!" cried the millionaire. "Come, sir," to Raymond. "Betake yourself from my premises. The law shall deal with you."

"If you say the word, sir, I will turn him over to the police now," said Harry.

"No; I am not ready yet," said Mr. Prentiss.

Raymond scrambled to his feet, and slunk from the room. But he paused at the threshold long enough to say:

"You have the upper hand now, curse you! but my time will come!"

After he had gone Mr. Prentiss grasped both of Harry's hands.

"God bless you, my boy," he said fervently. "You came just in time."

"Indeed, sir, I am glad of that," said Harry sincerely.

"Then you heard the interview?"

"I did."

"The mask is off."

"For which I am glad. It was for the purpose of warning you that I came here to-night."

"Ah!" cried Mr. Prentiss excitedly. "Then you have learned something else?"

"I have!"

"Let us hear it!"

Harry seated himself in a chair opposite the millionaire, and they conversed for a long while.

The young fireman narrated to him the thrilling incidents connected with the drowning of Jack Lane and the mysterious disappearance of Leda.

The millionaire smote his hand upon his knee forcibly.

"I tell you, Harry, that scoundrel is at the bottom of it all."

"I agree with you, sir," said Harry.

"What shall we do?"

"Really, he ought to be arrested and convicted. But, on the other hand, Jim Bisbee and all that gang need to be rooted out. Perhaps it would be as well to wait a while and try to bag them all together."

"I shall accept your advice, Harry, and will say that the town was never in such a state of danger before. It is nec-

essary to adopt rigorous measures at once to wipe out this gang."

"That is right, sir."

"We must organize a band of vigilants, and they must not be excused from duty until it is done."

"I think it can be done."

"Now, Harry, can I depend upon you to attempt that move?"

"You can, sir."

"Remember, I will stand back of you through it all. We will soon find out whether law and order will continue to reign in Oilville or not."

"I believe that it will, Mr. Prentiss."

"Keep on your guard for a fire. I feel sure that they will try to burn the oilworks again!"

"You need not fear, sir. I am sleepless in vigilance," replied Harry.

This terminated the interview.

Harry sallied forth into the night air and went home, but events were coming thick and fast.

The next day, upon the street, Harry saw a man who at once claimed his attention. He looked familiar.

Shadowing him carefully, he made an astounding discovery. It was Jim Bisbee in disguise.

The villain certainly had temerity to venture into the city. The young fireman was for a moment undecided what to do.

Should he cause Bisbee's arrest or not? There was but little time in which to make up his mind.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN THE DEN.

It would have been easy to have turned Bisbee over to the police. In spite of his disguise Harry knew him.

But a happier thought struck the young fireman.

It was deemed advisable to locate the hiding place of the incendiaries. Why not turn detective and shadow the villain?

Harry believed that more could be gained by this move than by any other.

Accordingly, he proceeded to do so. The villain continued on down the street at a leisurely pace.

He paused finally at the door of a drinking saloon.

He gave a cautious look up and down the street.

Harry glided into the doorway. The next moment Bisbee entered the saloon.

The impulse was strong upon Harry to follow him; but he knew that this would not be a safe or good policy.

He had no disguise, and the villain would be sure to know him and suspect him. So Harry abandoned the idea.

He concluded, however, that the villain had simply entered the place to get a drink, and that he would soon come out again.

So he decided to wait outside for his reappearance.

He did not have to wait long.

Bisbee came out presently, and this time he was accompanied by a rough looking villain of his own ilk.

Harry experienced a thrill.

This fellow he concluded was one of the incendiary gang also.

This premise was later proven true.

Bisbee and his companion now struck out at a brisk walk.

Harry followed them.

Very soon they had passed beyond the limits of the town and were in the country.

The road they took was thickly fringed with alder bushes.

Harry kept closely in the shadow of these so that they could not see him.

Suddenly the two villains turned from the road into the alders. Harry quickly reached the spot.

He turned into a path and climbed hastily a little eminence, fearing that they would give him the slip.

But before he had gone far he heard their voices. They seemed to have halted, and creeping cautiously forward on his hands and knees, Harry reached a copse from whence he could see them plainly.

They were standing upon the summit of the eminence, and evidently looking toward the city.

Every word they uttered reached Harry plainly, and it was a revelation to him.

"I tell ye, Kid Kelly, that we've got the wires just laid right," said Bisbee. "We can burn up them mills in six hours' time slick as a whistle."

"Mebbe ye're right, Jim!" said the villain called Kid Kelly.

"Of course I am!"

"Are all the boys posted?"

"You bet they are!"

"And everything is ready?"

"Yes."

"Waal, I reckon it'll be hot around here for us arter the oil works go up."

"I reckon."

"What's best to do?"

"Why, with that hundred thousand that Raymond has promised us we can make to Australia. I hev a brother in ther bush out thar. I feel a hankerin' fer bush life. Thar's nothing like it, Kelly."

"So you say."

"It's a fact!"

"Well, I'd like to try it then."

"You will have the chance if you follow me. Thar's many a pal I've put on the way to prosperity, and if it hadn't been for rum I'd been there myself long before this. But I'm too free-hearted, I am."

At this Bisbee heaved a deep sigh, at which Harry saw his companion look askance.

All this had been important information to Harry Hook.

It was certain that there was a scheme afoot to burn the oil works. That it was near consummation was also certain.

Harry's desire now was to locate the den of the incendiaries.

Once this was done, back to Oilville he would go and it would take but very little time to have the vigilantes upon the spot.

The trap must be sprung quickly in order to frustrate the deadly plot. Harry knew this.

So the young fireman was all agog with interest as he listened.

The villains conversed for some time longer upon other topics not so material.

Then Bisbee said:

"Well, Kid, let's go up to the cave."

"All right."

Together they strode away toward Black Cap. With the most intense excitement Harry followed them.

The young fireman was obliged to exercise the utmost caution.

Several times he fancied that the villains had discovered him. But each time his fears were allayed.

In this manner pursued and pursued kept on across the wild region.

After a time the black looking mountains came more prominently before them.

Striving to keep for some way, Harry saw the two villains pass before what looked like a pile of stone.

Bisbee knelt down and lifted a flat stone from the ground. Then he and his companion vanished through the opening which it covered.

Harry watched this intensely.

When assured that the coast was clear, the young fireman boldly approached the spot.

He knelt down and carefully lifted the stone. It disclosed a small opening just large enough to admit a man's body.

But below it Harry saw the walls of a cavern passage. There was an iron rod to cling to, and seizing this, the bold young fireman swung himself down into the place.

He closed the entrance by reaching up and moving the stone over with his hand.

He was in the den.

All was darkness about him.

But Harry began to cautiously grope his way along, until suddenly he caught a ray of light ahead.

That he concluded came from the main chamber of the incendiaries' den.

All was darkness about him.

He was making good progress through the passage when suddenly a startling thing happened.

He heard a grating sound behind him. There was a flash of light, and he saw a man's form coming down into the place.

Instinctively Harry saw the truth.

One of the gang was entering the den. The situation now was a risky one.

Discovery meant serious consequences. What was to be done?

There seemed but one thing, and Harry adopted it.

He shrunk into a niche in the wall and compressed himself into the smallest possible compass.

The newcomer slid down into the passage with a muttered oath. There was the scraping of a match, and then Harry saw the fellow advancing with a lighted taper in his hand.

It was a critical moment.

Harry could hear his heart beat in the intensity of the moment. Would the fellow see him?

It did not seem possible for him to escape notice. Yet, there was a chance, and the young fireman clung to the hope.

Nearer drew the fellow.

Now he was close at hand.

He was walking along with his head down, and was muttering in a maudlin fashion to himself.

Now he was close at hand, and the light of the taper fell upon Harry's crouching form. It was the chance of a thousand.

But as luck had it the fellow passed by, without seeing Harry or suspecting his presence.

CHAPTER XVII.

A PRISONER.

It was a close call, and Harry Hook felt relieved deeply when he was assured that he was safe.

The fellow passed on.

Like a shadow, the young fireman arose and flitted after him. Through the passage they went.

Very soon the interior of the incendiaries' den could be seen just ahead.

It was a large, square chamber, and in the center there burned a large calcium light, which made the place as light as day.

A dozen rough, looking men lay about in attitudes of ease.

Some of them were talking, and in the center of them all Bisbee and Kid Kelly.

The young fireman halted in the shadows and watched the scene for a moment.

He knew well the mighty risk he incurred in venturing thus into the lion's den.

But he was deeply fascinated by the experience. He watched the scene intently for some time.

Then an inspiration seized him.

He was anxious to hear the conversation made by Bisbee and Kelly.

There was a pile of lumber in one corner of the cave, near their position.

By keeping in the shadows, Harry reached this.

He slipped behind it and crouched in a listening attitude.

Every word now uttered by the villains came to his hearing.

"Are you sure everything is all ready, Jim Bent?" said Bisbee to one of the gang.

"You bet it is, boss."

"There will be no failure about the explosion?"

"Not a bit."

"I think we had better blow up the last end of the works first. Once the oil tanks get started there will be no stopping the flames."

"Ye're right, sir."

Harry's blood boiled.

He comprehended the perfect villainy of the game.

The plan was all laid to blow up the oil works.

"To-night at nine o'clock we blow up the oil works," said Bisbee, triumphantly; "then for the money from Raymond and away to Australia!"

The incendiaries cheered, and Harry experienced a thrill of horror.

He saw the mightiness of the responsibility which now hung upon his shoulders, and a dreadful fear seized him.

Would he be able to assume it?

This was the query.

He must make his escape from the cavern the quickest possible way.

It was not far from the evening hour, and he would have little more than time to reach the town and muster the vigilantes.

Guards must be brought to surround the oil works, the secret mind must be found and the explosion averted.

Also men must be on hand to seize the villains as they sallied from their stronghold.

All this would require time.

Was there sufficient time?

"There must be!" said Harry, compressing his lips. "I will make it!"

The villains now moved away to another part of the cavern. They were now beyond earshot.

Harry now began to consider his chances of escape from the place.

He, of course, thought only of retreating by the way he had entered.

But to his horror he saw a guard posted at the entrance to the passage. A swift, awful suspicion seized him.

What did this mean?

Were the villains aware of, or did they suspect his entrance to the passage?

If not, why was the guard posted at the exit?

Again, was this the only means of exit from the place?

The young fireman believed not.

He saw daylight just beyond through a broad passage. In the shadows of this passage he crept to the edge of a mighty precipice, fully fifty feet in sheer descent to the black waters of a pool in the swirling mountain river.

There was no visible chance of exit here.

Harry was now in a fearful state of mind. He could see no possible way of escape from the place.

What was to be done?

He was beside himself with suspense and agonized fear. Every moment was precious. The safety of the oil works depended upon him.

It was necessary to act at once.

Harry measured the distance for a jump. At first he meditated it. But sober second thought forbade the risk.

There was the chance that he might go to his death.

It would be wise to first endeavor to escape by some other way.

Accordingly, he crept back into the cavern. To his relief he could no longer see a guard at the passage to the exit.

Imbued with fresh hope, he crept toward this now.

But as he reached it the climax came.

Suddenly two dark forms pounced upon him from a niche in the wall and he was dragged into the light.

"A spy! A spy!" was the cry.

Harry, seized with a deadly desperation, made a plucky fight.

He hurled his assailants off with force and made a rush for the passage.

One of the incendiaries sprang in front of him. Quick as a flash, Harry let out with his fist.

Down went the fellow in a heap.

But another took his place, and half a dozen were upon the young fireman. It was quite useless now to struggle against such odds.

He was overpowered and dragged into the light.

"Who is it?" roared Bisbee. "Turn him to the light here. If he's a spy he mustn't go from here alive!"

Harry's face was revealed in the light of the calcium.

A gasping cry escaped the villain.

"Thunder and guns!" he cried. "Here's a rich one! It's that confounded young fireman."

Then he burst into a loud guffaw.

"Haw! Haw! Haw!" he roared. "Well, here's a pretty go! Run yer head inter a nice trap, didn't ye? Well, I swow, if you ain't jist the chap I'm glad to see."

The villain was more than delighted at the capture of Harry.

The young fireman was as pale as death, but very resolute.

He faced his foe bravely.

"Jericho!" exclaimed Kid Kelly, "how did he ever get in here?"

"Why, I reckon he follered us. Didn't I tell you I thought thar was some one behind us all the way?"

"Yes, ye did."

"An' I was right."

"I reckon ye was."

"What'll we do with him?"

"Waal, I've a nice little mess for him, but we haven't got time now. Tie him up and let him lay there until we get back."

The order was obeyed.

Harry was bound hand and foot and left upon the cavern floor.

A number of the incendiaries were now preparing to leave the cave.

The sensations of the young fireman as he lay there can well be imagined.

He was hopelessly a prisoner. Death faced him grimly.

He thought not of this, however, but of the awful fate which threatened Oilville. He could hear the incendiaries discussing their devilish plans as they got ready to leave the cavern.

It made his blood boil, and in his desperation he writhed and tugged at his bonds. But all in vain. He seemed utterly

powerless to avert the awful catastrophe which menaced Oilville.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE EXPLOSION.

The villain Bisbee saw him struggling thus and approached him.

"Lie still, you dog!" cried the wretch, giving his prostrate form a brutal kick. "What are ye struggling for? That won't do ye any good nor anybody else."

"Villain!" gritted Harry. "You cannot mean to carry out your nefarious purpose to blow up the oil works?"

"Yes, I do."

"But think of the atrocity of such a thing!"

The wretch laughed.

"That is all lost on me," he said. "Jim Bisbee is no victim of foolish sentiment."

"But surely you are not inhuman! Think of the precious lives that will be sacrificed!"

"What is that to me?"

"You are a monster!"

"And you are a fool!"

"Punishment will overtake you."

"Don't go preaching to me! I don't like it, and I won't have it. This is my game and I'm winning. You'll have your turn by and by."

With a coarse laugh the villain went on:

"You and I have a little score to settle, too. Wait till I get back from town, and we'll have it out!"

Harry said nothing, but his soul was filled with horror.

Already he saw Oilville in flames and dozens of innocent lives sacrificed. It filled him with desperation.

But he was powerless.

The incendiaries departed, and the prisoner was left with only two of the gang for guards.

Harry lay in his uncomfortable and helpless condition for what seemed ages.

The two incendiaries left to guard him found a bottle of whisky and a pack of cards and adjourned to another cavern chamber.

Harry was left alone.

Time passed wearily.

It seemed to him that it must be near the hour for the explosion.

He doubted not but that he should hear it in his present position. His hearing was constantly strained.

The two guards were too busy in the adjoining cavern to heed him.

They did not believe it possible for him to escape. Hope had not yet died out in Harry's breast.

He constantly writhed in his bonds. Suddenly he experienced a mighty thrill.

One of them loosened a bit.

He held his breath in intense excitement and tugged away valiantly. His efforts were rewarded with success.

One hand was free.

"Thank God!" he murmured. "I am sure of escape!"

With the free hand he began work on the knots. One after another yielded to his efforts.

In a few moments he had actually cleared his bonds, and cautiously rose to his feet.

He paused but a moment to make sure that the coast was clear.

He could hear the two villains in the other chamber haggling over their game of cards.

Harry waited for no more.

He glided into the passage of exit.

Along it he sped in the darkness. He saw a glimmer of sky just above him. He reached up and displaced the flat stone and sprang out into the outer air.

He had made good his escape.

"Now for Oilville!" he cried. "God give me strength to get there!"

Away he dashed over the rough ground. Faster and faster he ran.

Now he reached the banks of the mountain river. Over the rude bridge he sped.

On and on, breathing a fervent prayer for strength. Faster and faster, and now the lights of the town burst upon his view.

In that brief spell of time Harry Hook had lived a century.

It seemed as if he would never reach the town. He wondered what the time was, and if he would be able to divert the dread catastrophe.

A hundred times he saw the oil works in flames in his excited fancy.

He now reached the brow of a descent that led him directly down into the town.

One moment he paused to gain breath, and full upon his hearing smote the distant strokes of a bell.

It was the town clock, and he counted the strokes up to ten.

One second he paused with awful expectation. This was to be the dread signal for the explosion.

The next moment it came.

There was a rumble like distant thunder, a convulsion like an earthquake, and into the distant air leaped a mighty column of flame which seemed to travel to the very zenith.

An awful cry burst from Harry Hook's pallid lips.

"Too late!"

The distant quarter of the city seemed one wall of flame. Harry knew that the oil tanks were afire.

"God help Oilville to-night!" he muttered, with an awful, sinking sensation at the heart.

"It is awful."

Then he revived.

He knew that yeoman service was needed to save the residence part of the city.

Down into the town he ran.

As he came into the streets thrilling scenes were encountered.

A great crowd was at every street corner. People were rushing hither and thither in the wildest of terror.

Fire companies were rushing madly to the scene of the disaster. Harry saw No. 1 coming and joined them.

The boys cheered as the young chief joined them, and sped on. In a few moments they were confronted with an appalling situation.

The entire oil works was one sheet of flame.

It was madness to attempt to cope with them.

All that could be done was to limit the scope of the fire as much as possible.

But this seemed almost impossible.

Burning volumes of oil from the tanks rushed down through the streets of the town, carrying desolation, death and horror before it.

People were instantly overtaken and burned to cinders in a flash, buildings went up in a cloud, and wherever the burning oil went it carried destruction.

To combat it with water was only adding fuel.

The fire companies could not check it, and in several instances had hard work to get out of the way of it in time to save themselves.

It was a virtual reign of horror, and Oilville seemed eternally doomed.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE WORK OF THE DESTROYER.

It is difficult for pen to describe the situation at that moment adequately. The scene was a terrible one.

The fire companies were powerless to check the advance of the burning oil with such a substance as water.

But Harry Hook saw that more heroic measures must be adopted.

The oil was raising literal havoc everywhere. For years this dreadful monster had slumbered securely in the midst of the peaceful community.

But now the volcano had been loosed, and the result was awful to contemplate.

No power on earth seemed able to stop the flames. Every moment the situation grew worse.

The oil ran into the sewers, and an explosion followed, tearing up the ground and making a dirt heap of the streets.

Whole blocks were blown into the air as if with gunpowder. The heat from the flames was something awful.

But there is a limit to all things, and even the burning oil soon found this.

The oil works themselves had been razed to the ground in a very few minutes, and the oil, burning so fast and furiously, could keep up its volume only a short time.

Soon it began to subside, but scores of buildings were in flames, and the conflagration was sweeping over the whole city.

It was now possible for the firemen to work.

They could not combat the burning oil, but they could handle the flames in the buildings.

But Harry Hooker was far-sighted enough to see that to attempt the putting out of each individual fire was beyond the power of a hundred fire departments.

Measures of a more heroic sort must be adopted, and he was not slow to hit upon them.

Just midway in the business portion of the town was a broad canal.

Harry saw that all east of the canal must go.

To save the west side was now the object to be attained.

Along the line of the canal many valuable buildings stood.

But these it would be impossible to save. The flames would soon have them.

"As well give them up to dynamite as to the flames!" cried Harry Hook. "And thereby save the rest of the city."

Men were sent to blow up these buildings. In less than an hour they were razed to the ground, and the great conflagration was in a fair way to be under control.

The west side was saved.

One third of the beautiful city and its valuable oil works were in ashes.

But it was a matter of congratulation, certainly, that the other two-thirds had been preserved.

But for Harry Hook's prompt work in stopping the flames before they reached the canal the entire city would have been destroyed.

That night in Oilville was long remembered as a night of terror.

Suddenly a cry of alarm went up from the west side.

Almost instantly flames went up in a dozen different quarters.

Men with masks were seen going from house to house with torches.

Harry Hook sent the company to extinguish the flames, and himself headed an indignant mob to capture the incendiaries.

Wherever one of the wretches was seen he was shot down without mercy.

As good fortune had it, the fires set in so many quarters were quickly extinguished in their incipient state, and, thanks to prompt effort, the town was saved.

But Harry Hook seemed to be everywhere and in the thick-est of the excitement.

Leaving one fire well under control, he was about to rush to another, through a side street, when he beheld a thrilling scene.

A well-dressed, elderly man was struggling with two ruffians. He was trying in vain to hold them.

"Give me help!" he cried. "Don't let them escape."

"Hold on!" cried Harry. "I am coming!"

As the young fireman sprang forward he recognized the speaker.

It was Calvin Prentiss.

The millionaire had left his house at the first alarm of fire and hastened to the scene.

Coming through the street he had spied two men just in the act of firing a building.

At once the brave capitalist pounced upon them, and endeavored to hold them for arrest.

This was what had caused the struggle witnessed by Harry.

The young fireman rushed to the spot at full speed.

But before he could give the millionaire aid, the two villains broke away and made their escape.

Mr. Prentiss was much excited.

"Ah, Harry Hook, is it you?" he cried. "What a pity that we could not have caught those scoundrels!"

"Indeed, that is true, sir; but it is a wonder they did not do you harm. Are you alone and unprotected?"

"Don't think of it, Harry. My God! only think of Oilville to-night."

"I do, sir. It is a terrible blow."

"And all precipitated by a handful of unscrupulous ruffians. Actually, Harry, I believe Raymond is also at the bottom of this."

"I should not be afraid to wager that he is."

"If that is true he shall not go unpunished," cried Mr. Prentiss vehemently.

"He richly deserves hanging!"

"So he does. But how sudden the blow came, Harry!"

"You are right, sir. But I might have averted it had I been but a few hours sooner."

"What do you mean?"

"I was possessed of the villains' plans half a day before-hand, but I was unable to get here in time to frustrate them."

"You were?"

"Yes, sir."

"But—how was that?"

"I will tell you the story later."

"I will be glad to hear it. Is the conflagration under control now?"

"It is, sir?"

"Then I may as well go home. There is really nothing that I can do here. Ah, Harry Hook, you little know my position."

"I can feel for you, sir."

"This is a hard blow for me, and for Oilville."

"It is, sir."

"Come to me to-morrow at an early hour. I want to talk to you."

"I will do so."

Fortunately a livery stable was near at hand, and Mr. Prentiss procured a team and was driven home.

Harry returned to his duties.

The fire was now quite well in hand, but police and firemen patrolled the streets until daylight.

Many arrests were made, and public sentiment ran high. It was with difficulty that the prisoners were saved from being lynched.

It was near dawn when Harry, weary and exhausted, made his way home. Mrs. Hook received him with joy, for her heart had been wrung with many fears.

"I have had you dead many times in the past few hours," she said. "I am so glad you are safely back."

"Indeed, mother, your fears were without foundation," declared Harry. "I have not taken undue risks."

The young fireman turned in, and proceeded to snatch a few hours of sleep.

When he arose finally it was near the hour of nine o'clock. He dressed himself hastily and ate his breakfast.

His first move was to go to Mr. Prentiss' in response to the appointment made the night before.

CHAPTER XX.

FINANCIAL RUIN.

Harry dropped in at the engine house on his way uptown. He found everything there all right, but the boys were much fatigued with the night's work.

"Courage, boys!" he cried. "We have made a glorious record, and it will stand."

The boys cheered at this, and their depressed spirits revived.

Harry went on with all haste to the residence of Mr. Prentiss.

He was shown promptly into the millionaire's study. Mr. Prentiss was there, looking pale and careworn.

A large pile of papers were upon his desk, and he seemed to have been poring over these.

"I am glad to see you, Harry," he said, with a wan smile. "Sit down."

Harry sank into a seat.

"Now, Harry," continued Mr. Prentiss, "let me have your story."

And with this Harry told of the experiences in the incendiaries' den, and how Bisbee had freely used Raymond's name as an accomplice.

Mr. Prentiss listened attentively.

When Harry had finished his brow darkened, and he brought his fist down forcibly upon the table.

"Oh, what an atrocious hypocrite and villain that Raymond is!" he cried. "All these years he has been a viper in my bosom. How he has betrayed me!"

"Indeed, I am sorry for you," said Harry sincerely, "but I cannot help but believe that he has nigh run his course, and will soon be brought up with a short turn."

"It must be so, and yet at this late day what does it benefit me?"

Mr. Prentiss arose and paced the floor with the most intense of mental suffering.

"Indeed, sir," said Harry, with an effort to cheer him up, "will it not be possible to rebuild the oil works?"

Mr. Prentiss turned.

"Harry," he said slowly, "let me tell you of my circumstances. I am a ruined man. The oil works were not insured, for no insurance company would take the risk. They are a dead loss to me. To be sure, the oil wells are stored, and it might pay me to rebuild. I had expected to do this, and thought I had plenty of money to do it. But this very

morning comes news from New York that my stocks, in which my surplus was temporarily invested, have panned out worthless. These stocks I got through Raymond. It is only another of his villainous schemes."

Harry was horrified.

"That is awful," he murmured.

"That is not the name for it, my lad. I am a ruined man. In this hour of my trouble I am alone—alone in the world!"

The wretched man sank into his chair and buried his face in his hands.

Harry Hook's whole sympathetic nature was aroused.

His eyes flashed.

"It is Raymond's work!" he cried, "but why cannot the villain be punished?"

"Ah, I fear there is not sufficient evidence to convict him."

"Then let detectives be put upon his track and hound him until that evidence is procured," cried Harry.

"Alas! I have no money—nothing to fight with now."

At that moment the servant stood upon the threshold.

A man stood by him.

"Mr. Prentiss, sir," said the butler, with a bow. The visitor strode into the room.

"Mr. Prentiss?" he asked.

"Right here, sir," said the millionaire.

"Mr. Prentiss, I am Sheriff Lake. I am here upon rather a disagreeable duty. Larkin, Mead & Co., brokers of New York, have handed me a summons and attachment to execute upon you, sir. I but do my duty."

"Let me see it."

The sheriff handed him the writ.

"Larkin, Mead & Co. are very previous," said Mr. Prentiss forcibly. "It is evident that they fear that I am not able to meet their claims."

"I am only complying with their request, sir."

"Very well. I will answer this at the proper time and place."

The sheriff bowed and withdrew.

Mr. Prentiss read the attachment and groaned.

"A writ for one hundred thousand dollars," he exclaimed. "That will sweep from me everything I have in the world. Even this house will go."

"But that is not right," cried Harry indignantly. "Do you owe this money justly?"

"No, else I should have paid it long ago. It is all Raymond's rascally work."

Harry's sympathy for Mr. Prentiss was of the strongest. Yet he was powerless to offer aid.

A short while later he was again making his way downtown. It seemed to Harry as if a great change had come over his life in the last forty-eight hours.

He foresaw the effects of a mighty radical change in Oilville.

Mr. Prentiss was driven to the wall, and would probably be obliged to give up. The oil wells would go into other hands, probably Raymond's.

This would mean the altering of the whole moral and business life of the smart little town.

In a small city like Oilville the leading magnate of necessity exercises a powerful influence over the community.

He may do this for better or worse. That the latter would be Raymond's purpose Harry felt sure.

"If Alden Raymond gains supremacy," he mused, with a chill, "my chances in Oilville are at an end. It will be better for me to leave the place at once."

One important thing Harry had forgotten, and he at once decided to carry it out without further delay.

This was to pay a visit at once to the den of Bisbee and his gang with a posse of armed men.

He went at once to see the chief of the Vigilants.

It required no time at all to organize the band. In less than an hour the start was made.

One hundred armed men were on route for Black Cap.

Harry led the way, and straight to the entrance to the incendiaries' den they went.

But evidently Bisbee had counted on this move, for he had caused the aperture to be filled up with stones.

"Waal," exclaimed the Vigilant chief, "if that coyote thinks that will keep us out of there he is very much mistaken. Pull out them stomes, boys!"

With a cheer the men set to work.

The stones were tumbled out of the place in a jiffy. But suddenly a startling thing occurred.

The crack of rifles smote upon the air, and two of the Vigilants fell.

The incendiaries were hiding above on the mountainside, and poured in a volley.

This drove the Vigilants to cover, and a sharp skirmish followed.

One of the Vigilants received a wound, and this aroused Haley's spirit.

With a loud, hoarse cry, he sprang up with the words:

"Come on, boys! Let's drive the coyotes out of that place."

With a cheer the Vigilants followed their leader up the height. It was a risky move, but plucky.

Up they went, and the next moment had driven the foe back before them.

Two of them were taken prisoners. The others retreated incontinently into secret caverns.

Meanwhile, Harry Hook, left at the stone-blocked entrance, had not been idle.

He found that an aperture had been made large enough to admit his body, and he boldly slid down into the cavern.

He was in total darkness.

For aught he knew the foe might be all about him, but the young fireman's plucky spirit was up.

CHAPTER XXI.

EXPIATING HIS CRIMES.

Harry was possessed of one thrilling thought as he invaded the den of the incendiaries so boldly.

This was Leda Lane.

He felt reasonably sure that the young girl was held a captive in some cavern of Black Cap.

It might be that this was the very cavern. At least, he would make the search.

Now that he was in the den, Harry felt the need of great caution.

He crept silently along to the main chamber of the cavern.

The calcium light was not burning, but, as it was daylight, enough light came from the cliff entrance.

Harry was surprised.

There seemed to be no one in the place. The truth burst upon him. They had deserted it.

But it was easy to understand this.

A fight was going on outside, and the incendiaries were probably all in the outer air making a defense.

This left the cavern chamber practically empty. It also settled all doubt in Harry's mind as to the existence of another means of entrance and exit.

Making sure that the coast was clear, Harry now began to look about.

Several passages led from the main chamber of the cavern. Where all or each led to Harry could only guess.

An idea came to him.

He raised his voice, and cried:

"Leda! If you hear me, answer—it is Harry!"

Almost instantly the young fireman heard a rustling sound near, and a low, faint cry of joy.

"Oh, Harry!"

"Leda!"

"You have come to save me?"

"Thank God! I have found you!"

Harry's gaze had traveled instantly to a small, square aperture cut in the stone wall of the cavern passage.

He saw now the dim outlines of a heavy wooden door.

At once he sprang forward to open it; but a heavy padlock secured it.

Harry was not to be foiled.

He picked up an axe lying near and dealt the padlock a blow.

It gave way, and the door swung open. The next moment Leda Lane, pallid but joyful, sprang into Harry's arms.

That was a joyful meeting.

For an instant Harry forgot all else in the transport of the moment. Then an awful horror came to him.

He thought of Jack.

Leda did not know of her brother's tragic fate. After the first greetings were over she asked:

"And Jack—how is he?"

Harry drew a deep breath.

How could he tell her the truth? It seemed as if he must stifle.

He reflected that it would not do to tell her the truth in this place and at this time. He evaded the question by pretending not to hear it.

He stepped back suddenly, and feigned deep alarm.

"Every moment we stay here we jeopardize our lives," he cried. "We must leave at once!"

"Where are the incendiaries?" asked Leda, with a shudder.

"They cannot be far away."

"Oh, that horrible man!" she murmured, with a shiver. "He told me that I must choose between death and marrying him."

"And which did you select?" asked Harry briefly.

"Death!" replied the young girl fearlessly.

Harry now took her hand and led her away through the passages.

In a few moments they came to the aperture by which he had entered.

Harry enlarged it, and crawled through, and then assisted Leda through. They were in the open air.

Leda Lane was free once more.

The young girl's emotions were far beyond expression. She clung to Harry as if fearful that she would be taken back.

Harry led the way over the hill in quest of the Vigilants.

He heard a loud cheering in a grove of trees near, and went thither. He was rewarded with a terrible spectacle.

Half a hundred of the Vigilants were gathered about a tree, from the branch of which there hung a man by the neck.

It required but one glance for Harry to recognize the victim of Judge Lynch.

It was Jim Bisbee.

The villain and murderer had expiated his miserable crimes at last, and in a fitting manner.

Most of the other incendiaries had also been captured. They shared Bisbee's fate, among them Kid Kelly.

Harry regretted the occurrence upon one score.

He believed that it would have been possible to have wrung a confession from Bisbee, implicating Raymond.

But it was now too late.

The only means at present apparent for convicting the villain was removed. But the end was not yet.

The Vigilants were triumphant.

Indeed, they had good reason to feel so, for the gang of incendiaries, which had so long been the curse of Oilville, had been most effectually wiped out.

The return was now triumphantly made to Oilville.

Harry and Leda went straight home. Mrs. Hook was so overjoyed that she wept at Leda's safe return.

But now came the painful duty of breaking the news of Jack's fate. Leda was prostrated with grief.

But Harry had already registered an oath that Raymond should be brought to justice.

He meant it.

Two days passed.

The excitement had in a measure died out. There was now one general topic of conversation in the town, and this was the rebuilding of the oil works.

There was not one in the town but would gladly have seen Mr. Prentiss do this.

But the unfortunate man had gone to the wall. The oil wells were in the hands of his creditors and were for sale.

Everybody felt bad for Mr. Prentiss.

A heroic move was made to raise the money by subscription, organize a company, and put Mr. Prentiss on his feet once more.

But this fell through.

Business was dead in Oilville. The town was nigh ruined. Something had to be done.

At this time the report was circulated that Alden Raymond was buying the oil wells, and would become the future magnate of Oilville.

The villain's work seemed but just begun.

CHAPTER XXII.

A WINDFALL.

Nobody felt worse over the situation than did Harry Hook. The young fireman had pulled all the wires possible in favor of Mr. Prentiss. The latter was overcome.

"Harry, you are my greatest friend," he said, warmly. "I shall never forget you."

"I would that I had it in my power to do more," said the young fireman, generously.

A few days after this a column article came out in the Oilville Times describing an interview with Raymond.

It portrayed him as a wonderful financier, a man of honorable methods, and just the man to redeem Oilville.

It went on to say further that he intended to rebuild the oil works, and that the town would soon be pushing on to greater prosperity.

But Harry Hook was outspoken and fearless in his denunciation of the villain.

"I tell you he is the most dangerous villain we have in Oilville," he declared. "He is not the man to tie to."

But the business men were frantic and were not disposed to question too closely the character of any man who would revive business in Oilville.

The working class cared nothing about Raymond's personal character.

They only wanted their wages.

It is thus the world over. One man builds his fortune upon the ruins of another. The bustling hurrying crowd do not stop to haggle over a little question of honor.

It certainly looked as if Raymond's star was in the ascendant.

It must not be supposed that the villain was not evilly exultant over this.

His bitter hatred for Prentiss was well gratified, for he saw his former partner reduced to genteel poverty.

"The wicked shall flourish for a time like a green bay tree," say the Holy Writ, and so it was with Raymond.

But a crash is sure to come sooner or later, for the underlying principle of the structure was not laid upon truth and right—the only safe foundation.

One day Harry went home from his work and entered the house to find his mother in a very excited state of mind.

The good woman threw her arms about her son's neck.

"Oh, Harry!" she cried, "I really believe that fortune is to smile upon us after many years of evil luck!"

Harry was astounded.

"Why, mother!" he exclaimed in amazement, "what do you mean?"

"Sit down here, my son, and I will tell you."

Mrs. Hook produced a letter, the envelope of which looked legal. Harry saw upon the end of it the firm card, Wyse & Sharp, Attorneys at Law, San Francisco.

"You can remember your Uncle Lester, Harry?" asked Mrs. Hook.

"Uncle Lester!" cried Harry. "Well, I do. We were great friends."

"Yes, he was very fond of you as a child. Well, he went West, and I have heard that he got very rich!"

"Rich?" gasped Harry.

"Yes!"

The young fireman was all in a quiver.

"Go on, mother! What about him?"

"He is dead!"

Harry experienced a shock. An expression of pain crossed his face.

"I am sorry to hear that," he said. "I always liked Uncle Lester."

"Well, here is a letter which will tell you all better than I can."

Mrs. Hook handed Harry the letter. The young fireman broke it open and read:

"Mrs. Hook:

"Dear Madam:—We are appointed executors of the will of Lester Bailey, deceased, of Sacramento; also administrator of his estate. By the will, it appears that you and your son Harry are the heirs mentioned. By communicating with us by return mail you will learn much of advantage to you. The property left by Lester Bailey will aggregate a million in round figures. Hoping to hear from you soon, we are

"Yours respectfully,

"Wyse & Sharpe."

Harry Hook read this, and his head swam. For a moment he could not act. Then he recovered.

He sprang up with a wild cry:

"Hurrah! Mother! Mother!" he cried, "that means us. Uncle Lester has left it to us. We are millionaires!"

Harry Hook seldom lost command of himself. But this was a windfall of the most wonderful sort.

For a long while mother and son sat discussing their good fortune. Indeed, it seemed too good to believe.

Yet it was true, as they readily knew. From poverty they were suddenly raised to affluence.

The letter from Wyse & Sharpe was at once answered. Several days passed before an answer came.

Then one of the firm appeared in person and visited the Hooks.

The usual legal forms were gone through and the will sent to probate. That night Harry Hook had unlimited wealth at his command.

Such a sudden transition could not help but have a strong effect upon the nerves of the fortunate ones.

Harry would not believe it else than a dream for some time.

The young fireman was astute enough not to say anything to any one in Oilville about his great luck.

But he had his plans laid for a daring coup de main.

None of the people in Oilville suspected the truth. Harry went to his duties just the same and officiated at a number of fires in his usual plucky manner.

But one thing he did do which added to his wonderful happiness, until it seemed as if the cup was full.

He took Leda Lane blushing to his arms, after exacting from her a happy promise to be his wife.

He had loved her from the first, and her poverty and the cloud of disgrace which had hung over her father's head were no bars for impulsive Harry Hook.

"If you will have me I am yours!" he said, and what could Leda say but yes?

Mrs. Hook was well pleased.

"James Lane's daughter is good enough for my Harry," she said, fondly, "and that is saying a good deal."

One day Harry met Mr. Prentiss.

He looked haggard and careworn, but yet there was a light of hope in his eyes.

"I am awful glad to see you, Harry," he said. "Yes, in a measure, I may say that I am more hopeful. I have placed some securities which I had forgotten were in my possession on the market, and I expect to realize quite handsomely from them."

"I am glad to hear that," said Harry.

"Yes, but it will never put me on my feet. It is a mere drop in the bucket as it were."

"Yet it will contribute somewhat to your support."

"Oh, certainly, in a prudent way. By the way, I have heard that the oil wells are to be sold by auction to-morrow."

"Indeed!"

"It is likely that Raymond will be on hand and will buy them."

"Ah, indeed!" said Harry, dreamily.

Mr. Prentiss regarded Harry with something of surprise at his peculiar manner. He, however, said presently:

"Well, Harry, I am glad to have met you! Take care of yourself!"

"The same to you."

Harry went on down the street like on in a daze.

"To-morrow!" he kept muttering; "I will be there. I must see my solicitor."

At this moment a mysterious looking man stepped out of a doorway. He touched his hat.

"Mr. Hook, glad to see you!" he said.

Harry gave a start.

"Ah, Miles!" he cried. "I hope you come with good report!"

Upon the man's breast was a silver star, the badge of a detective.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE AUCTION.

The detective, for such he evidently was, smiled and looked cautiously about.

"Yes," he said, confidently; "I think that in a very few days we shall have the evidence to convict our man."

"You do?"

"Yes."

Harry grasped his hand.

"May the Lord be with you!" he cried, heartily. "It will be the greatest triumph of your career, I assure you."

"I feel sure of that."

"It will make your fame."

"Good!"

"I tell you, Jim Miles, better than all else, you will have saved an innocent man from an unjust fate."

"That will be better than all else," replied the detective.

"I have but one more thread to pull to make my chain of evidence complete."

"Then Bisbee was innocent?"

"Of that deed—yes."

"You are sure that the man you have under surveillance is the real murderer of little Jack Lane?"

"As sure of it as I am that my name is Miles."

"Good! I am well pleased with your work."

"I always endeavor to faithfully do my duty."

"I believe you. When you have your man behind prison bars, come to me and I will give you five thousand dollars!"

The detective bowed.

"All I want is to convict the murderer of little Jack Lane."

"Yes."

"That is all!"

They shook hands and Miles vanished like a veritable shadow. Harry went on his way with exuberant feelings.

The next day a large crowd was gathered at the oil well.

Many prominent capitalists were present, and among them was Raymond.

The villain was attired in a flashy suit of clothes with a huge diamond upon his shirt front.

He conducted himself with great arrogance, and a blustering manner which was disgusting to the better men of the crowd.

Mr. Prentiss was in the background, and Harry Hook went up to him.

There was a moisture in the ex-millionaire's eyes as he said:

"Well, Harry, it is a hard sight for me, as you can well imagine, to look upon all this ruin of my fortune and the enterprise which was once dear to me as the apple of my eye. It is all swept away."

"Indeed, Mr. Prentiss," said Harry, with feeling, "I can understand exactly how you feel."

"I can never retrieve myself, Harry."

"Don't say that. You are not an old man, and the chances of life are many. Cling to hope."

"Alas! I can see none."

Harry looked straight at Mr. Prentiss.

"You were never nearer the retrieving of your fortune than at this very moment," he declared.

"I don't understand you."

"Wait and see."

Mr. Prentiss looked puzzled. But he said no more, and at this moment the auctioneer opened the sale.

He begun with a long preamble describing the property and its value, and then calling for a bid.

"How much am I offered?" he cried. "Give me a bid!"

"Twenty thousand dollars," said a capitalist.

"Twenty-five," said Raymond.

"I am offered twenty-five. Who will give me the thirty? Thirty! Who will give me thirty-five? Now I have it—thirty-five! Who will give me forty?"

Raymond had outbidden his rival, and for full two minutes the figure was held at forty thousand.

Harry saw that the others were all done bidding. It was evident that Raymond believed the property his for this pittance.

But the young fireman stepped coolly forward.

"Mr. Auctioneer!" he said, "May I ask whose bid that

The auctioneer stared at him as much as to imply that he could not go over the bid, and shouted:

"Forty thousand for the last time! Are you done?"

"No!" cried Harry, loudly. "I will give you fifty thousand dollars for this property!"

Every eye was upon the young fireman. The auctioneer ceased talking.

Raymond stepped forward.

He glared at Harry, and in a supercilious way, said:

"Auctioneer, you will pay no attention to that young pauper. He is only seeking to break up the sale."

The auctioneer turned his back to Harry.

"Forty thousand dollars!" he cried, "and sold to——"

But he never finished the sentence.

A cry of disapproval went up from the crowd.

"Fair play!" was the cry. "You must take the boy's offer."

"But he hasn't got fifty thousand dollars!" cried Raymond, furiously.

One of the assignees of the sale now stepped forward and said:

"The young man's bid is accepted. Auctioneer, go on with your work!"

"Then I'll bid sixty thousand dollars!" cried Raymond, furiously.

"Seventy!" said Harry.

"Eighty!"

"Ninety!"

"One hundred thousand dollars!"

Harry drew in a deep breath. He turned and faced Raymond.

"One hundred and fifty thousand dollars!" he cried. "You cannot give over that, sir, for you have not got the money."

A bitter curse dropped from the villain's lips. He shrunk back.

A cheer went up from the crowd.

"Hurrah!" they cried. "Good for the little fellow! He has got pluck!"

"Sold for one hundred and fifty thousand dollars to Harry Hook!" cried the auctioneer.

Calvin Prentiss was at Harry's shoulder. He was pale and astonished.

"Harry, what are you doing?" he asked. "Who are you bidding for?"

"Myself!"

The ex-millionaire looked astonished.

"Where did you get so much money?"

"You shall learn in time."

But Alden Raymond stood sneering and syncophant near by.

"The terms of the sale are cash," he said. "I am curious to see the cash paid."

Harry turned upon him.

"Remain where you are," he said, coolly, "and you shall see it."

Then Harry turned and beckoned to his solicitor, who came forward with a black satchel in his hands.

He opened it, and the money in one thousand dollar bank-notes, one hundred and fifty in all, was counted out. There was fully fifty thousand left in the satchel.

"Here is the money," said Harry, "and I claim to be the owner of this rich property which you, Alden Raymond, have tried to acquire by intrigue and falsehood, by treachery and crime."

CHAPTER XXIV.

CONCLUSION.

Harry's declaration had a startling effect upon the crowd. Raymond turned livid.

"Where did you get that money?" he gritted, savagely. "Curse you!"

"It has come to me honestly," said Harry, firmly. "I have not leagued with incendiaries, nor have I committed murder and sent an innocent man to prison for life to gain it."

Raymond quivered like an aspen.

"What do you mean?" he gritted.

"Just what I say."

"Do your words imply an accusation?"

"They do!"

"Take care! You will be called upon to prove these statements!"

"I make no statements that I do not stand ready to back with absolute proof."

"Shall I give the proof?"

"You cannot do it."

But even as he spoke the villain's heart failed him.

He saw a man with keen, penetrating eyes advancing at a gesture from Harry. Instinctively terror seized him.

He turned deadly pale, but kept up his air of bravado.

The detective, Jim Miles, pulled a pair of bracelets from his pockets.

"I've been on your track a long while, my friend," he said. "Please put these on your wrists."

Foam flecks came upon Raymond's lips.

"What? Do you mean to arrest me?"

"I do!"

"Upon what charge? Where is your warrant?"

"Here!"

Miles drew a paper from his pocket.

"You are cornered, my fine fellow," he said, coolly. "This warrant charges you with the murder of Jack Lane!"

"It is false! Who dares bring that charge against me?"

"Steady!" said the detective, mildly. "I have two witnesses, and they will swear that they saw you strike the boy senseless and throw him into the mill pond."

The attitude of the villain was now a most pitiable one.

He had faced the situation with rare hardihood, but the last plank was now knocked out from under him.

"The game is up!" he said. "I am not the one to kick against Fate. But I have had sweet revenge."

"And you are now in a position to repent of your crimes?" said Harry Hook.

The villain flashed a malevolent gaze at Harry as he was led away.

The affair had held the crowd enthralled. It was a stunning surprise to many of the best citizens of Oilville, who had deemed Raymond an honorable man.

But Calvin Prentiss was the most deeply affected of all.

He came up to Harry and took his hands in his own.

"My boy," he said, "I don't know where you got that money, but I am glad of your prosperity."

"I will tell you where I got the money," said Harry. "It is mine by legal inheritance. My uncle died in San Francisco a short time ago and left me a round million."

Mr. Prentiss was quite overcome.

"I am happy in your fortune," he said, "but to my dying day I shall never forget this last encounter of yours with an arch-villain. It seems as if Raymond's exposure gives me a new lease of life."

"Mr. Prentiss," said Harry, earnestly, "I hope you will not be offended if I make you an offer?"

"What is it?"

"I have bought this oil plant, but it is a business with which I am in no wise familiar. The counsel and assistance of a man like you is what I need. Will you kindly accept me as a partner?"

Mr. Prentiss was quite overcome.

"You don't mean that, Harry?"

"Every word of it!"

"But—I have no money."

"I don't care for that. Put your experience against my capital."

"But that is hardly fair."

"Yes, it is. At least, if I don't kick, you need not."

So the bargain was made. Arrangements were made at once for the rebuilding of the oil works.

Harry Hook, the boy fireman, had suddenly risen to the position of the foremost man of Oilville. Prosperity and happiness were destined to be his lot, as is ever the case with the upright and honest man.

Raymond, confined in prison and awaiting trial, was wholly without friends.

The villain had "thrown up the sponge," to use a slang phrase. Yet he performed one good act to offset much of his wickedness.

This was to make a confession which cleared James Lane.

After many years of pain and suffering the innocent man walked out of prison. Life opened new vistas before him, and he was happy in the employ of his prospective son-in-law, as the superintendent of the oil works.

Alden Raymond was tried and sentenced. By the efforts of a few, his sentence was commuted from hanging to imprisonment for life.

Harry restored Mr. Prentiss' lovely home to him. He did many other kind and philanthropic deeds which made him popular.

For himself he built a lovely home and made his aged

mother happy. Leda Lane developed into beautiful womanhood and became his dear wife.

Not again was Oilville to witness such a trial by fire as that for which one villain—Alden Raymond—was responsible.

The town became more prosperous than ever, and the happiest resident was Harry Hook.

The young fireman, however, never forgot his fireman's instinct, and at the tap of the bell was sure to respond. But business cares crowded upon his time, and he remains only an honorary member of No. 1.

But he is as strongly in with the boys as ever, and the happiest days of his life are spent in mutual reminiscences with former comrades, when he was the penniless but plucky Harry Hook, the boy chief of No. 1.

THE END.

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